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Former Social Democratic Partisanship, Working-Class Background, and Support for Right-Wing Populist Parties: A Research Note

Marc Debus  · Richard Traummüller

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Abstract Modern democracies have seen increasing support for populist parties in recent years. One major topic in this research area concerns the roles of individuals with a working-class background and former supporters of social democratic parties in the increasing vote share of right-wing populist parties. In this research note, we study the determinants of support for the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in the 2013 and 2017 *Bundestag* (German federal) elections. Using data from the German Socio-Economic Panel, we show that individuals with a working-class background were more likely to vote for the AfD than for other parties. However, former Social Democratic Party voters and identifiers who had a working-class background were also more likely to support the radical right and anti-immigrant AfD in 2017 over other parties or over non-voting. We do not find similar effects for the 2013 *Bundestag* election, when the AfD adopted a less extremist, Eurosceptic, and national-conservative profile. Our findings indicate that the German Social Democrats lost previous supporters with a working-class background when a radical right party with an anti-immigrant profile competed for votes. We discuss the implications of these findings for the stability of liberal democracies.

Keywords Working class · Social democracy · Voting behaviour · Voter migration · Right-wing populism · Germany

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Frühere sozialdemokratische Anhänger, Arbeiterstatus und Unterstützung für rechtspopulistische Parteien: eine Forschungsnotiz

Zusammenfassung In den modernen Demokratien ist die Unterstützung für populistische Parteien in den letzten Jahren gestiegen. Ein wichtiges Thema in diesem Forschungsbereich ist die Rolle von Personen aus der Berufsgruppe der Arbeiter und ehemaliger Anhänger sozialdemokratischer Parteien für den steigenden Stimmenanteil rechtspopulistischer Parteien. In diesem Beitrag untersuchen wir die Determinanten der Unterstützung für die „Alternative für Deutschland“ (AfD) bei den Bundestagswahlen 2013 und 2017. Anhand von Daten des sozioökonomischen Panels (GSOEP) zeigen wir, dass Arbeiter im Vergleich zu anderen Parteien und zur Option der Nichtwahl häufiger für die AfD stimmten. Ehemalige SPD-Wähler und Befragte mit früherer SPD-Parteidentifikation, die einen Arbeiterhintergrund haben, unterstützten 2017 jedoch auch eher die rechtspopulistische und migrations skeptische AfD als andere Parteien. Für die Bundestagswahl 2013, als die AfD ein weniger radikales, euroskeptisches und nationalkonservatives Profil annahm, finden wir keine ähnlichen Effekte. Unsere Ergebnisse deuten darauf hin, dass die deutschen Sozialdemokraten frühere Anhänger aus der Gruppe der Arbeiter verloren haben, als eine weit rechtsstehende Partei mit einem einwanderungsfeindlichen Profil um Stimmen warb. Wir diskutieren die Implikationen dieser Ergebnisse für die Stabilität liberaler Demokratien.

Schlüsselwörter Arbeiter · Sozialdemokratie · Wahlverhalten · Wählerwanderung · Rechtspopulismus · Deutschland

1 Introduction

Social democratic parties in modern democracies have seen decreasing support in elections over the last decades (Rennwald 2020; Bremer and Rennwald 2023; Häusermann and Kitschelt 2024). Recent research suggests that they have especially lost their traditional core-voter clientele, i.e. blue-collar workers in the industrial sector (Gingrich and Häusermann 2015; Benedetto et al. 2020; Grant and Evans 2023; Marks et al. 2023, pp. 253–254), and that the key supporting groups of social democratic parties are now employees in the public sector and professionals in the social–cultural sector (Abou-Chadi and Wagner 2019, 2024).¹

Given that this declining trend in support for social democratic parties coincides with increasing support for parties from the radical right (e.g. Berman and Snegovaya 2019), it seems natural to link these two trends and focus on changes in voting

¹ In the recent elections to the European Parliament in 2024, 25% of the German voters with a working-class background selected the candidates of the far-right and populist Alternative for Germany (AfD), whereas the Social Democratic Party (SPD) won only 14% of the votes in this occupational group—a share that is in line with the average share of votes that the SPD received in that election in Germany (13.9%; see https://www.forschungsgruppe.de/Wahlen/Wahlanalysen/NewsI_Euro_240609.pdf; see also Westheuser and Lux 2024). At the same time, the German Social Democrats received their highest share of votes (19%) among the civil servants in the European Parliamentary election of 2024.

behaviour patterns of individuals with a working-class background. More specifically and given the historically grown relationship between the working class and social democratic parties (Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Bartolini and Mair 2007; Rennwald 2020), we ask whether former voters of social democratic parties, particularly those with a working-class background, have indeed switched to parties on the radical right. In addition, we discuss whether Social Democrats could win back individuals with a working-class background by adopting policies that cater to their preferences, such as a restrictive stance on immigration.² Leading scholars in the field are sceptical of both possibilities and even speak of a myth (see Abou-Chadi and Wagner 2024; Bischof and Kurer 2024).

We contribute to this debate by providing two fresh new angles on the problem of working-class voters' transition from social democrats to right-wing populists. First, and contrary to Abou-Chadi and Wagner (2024) and Bischof and Kurer (2024), we are less concerned with the fate of social democracy than with the fate of working-class voters. Instead of asking where most former social democrats went and how social democrats can mobilise voters, we are interested in where their working-class supporters went and where they believe they can find political representation of their interests. Second, and relatedly, we argue that an accurate picture of the transition from social democrats to right-wing populists requires that we do not restrict ourselves to the *direct* migration from one party to another or to the camp of abstainers (e.g. Evans and Tilley 2017; Schäfer and Zürn 2021) but that we also consider *indirect* migration. That is, we should consider the possibility that former social democrats turned to nonaffiliated or nonvoters in a first step, before turning to right-wing populist parties who cater to their preferences in a second step. Although this notion has been voiced by journalists and pundits, scholarly work that investigates this indirect voter migration is rare, in particular regarding the working class. The findings by Rennwald (2020, p. 65), for instance, indicate that production and service workers "are less likely to participate in elections in the 2010s but when they did, they were also less likely to support social democracy than in the past". Jankowski (2024), who uses the panel data of the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES), studies voter migration to the left-wing populist Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (*Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht*; BSW) and has found that this new party is popular with former left-wing supporters and voters who turned away from the established parties after the federal election of 2021 and have since sympathised with the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*; AfD).

To evaluate the relationships between (former) social democratic partisanship, working-class background, and support for radical right parties, we focus on the German case and voter migration from the Social Democratic Party (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*; SPD) to the AfD. The AfD was founded in 2013 in

² Some social democratic parties such as the Danish Labour Party in 2019 reacted to the success of anti-immigrant parties from the far right by adopting restrictive positions on immigration policy on the one side and policies that call for a stronger welfare state on the other (e.g. Etzerodt and Kongshøj 2022). Other social democratic parties in Europe, for instance the Austrian Social Democrats (SPÖ), face increasing internal debates and conflicts about their parties' programmatic strategies (see Rathgeb and Wolkenstein 2022).

reaction to the handling of the European financial crisis and changed its Eurosceptic and national-conservative profile into a radical-right and anti-immigrant profile in 2015 (see Lewandowsky et al. 2016; Arzheimer and Berning 2019 for an overview). By focusing on the two federal elections in 2013 and 2017, we are also able to test whether this programmatic shift has attracted working-class voters.

Relying on data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP) and tracing former SPD voters and former SPD identifiers with and without a working-class background, we find that respondents who supported the Social Democrats in the 2013 *Bundestag* election and respondents who had previously identified with the SPD were less likely to vote for the AfD than any other political option in 2017 (this is in line with the findings by Abou-Chadi et al. 2021). However, former SPD voters and identifiers with a working-class background were more likely to support the AfD in 2017 than former SPD supporters with a different occupational background. Thus, when the AfD adopted a clearly right-wing populist and anti-immigrant profile, it did not only attract workers in general but also those workers who had previously supported the SPD or identified themselves with the Social Democrats. These individuals were not immune against voting for the AfD in 2017. Instead, they were as likely to support the AfD as working-class individuals without a previous connection to the SPD. An important implication of this pattern is that a focus on direct voter migration may have underestimated the movement of working-class voters from the Social Democrats to the right-wing populists. We do not find similar effects for the 2013 *Bundestag* election when the newly founded AfD adopted a Eurosceptic and national-conservative policy profile. Besides voters with no party identification in the years before the 2013 and 2017 elections, former party identifiers of the socialist Left Party (*Die Linke*) were more likely to support the AfD in 2017. These results remain stable when controlling for further factors that explain voting for radical-right parties and when information on the ethnic background of voters is integrated into the analysis. An important implication of this finding is that party platforms seem to matter and that working-class voters, as well as the ones who previously identified with the SPD, turned to the AfD, possibly for its restrictive stance on immigration.

2 Why Would Working-Class Voters Switch from the SPD to the AfD?

Our argument refers to the literature on voting behaviour and party switching on the one side and on the issue profile of parties and its implications for voting behaviour on the other. Economic and social change resulted in higher social and spatial mobility over the last decades such that the number of individuals living in homogeneous societal groups (“milieus”) that have a traditional alliance with a political party, induced by historical social cleavages (Lipset and Rokkan 1967), decreased (e.g. Manza et al. 1995; Clark and Lipset 2001; Kriesi et al. 2006; Elff 2007; Evans and De Graaf 2013; Rennwald 2020; Bornschier et al. 2021; Elff and Roßteutscher 2022). These patterns have resulted in increased electoral volatility in general and in more fluctuating and/or declining support for traditional cleavage

parties such as the Social Democrats that historically represented—in an alliance with labour unions—the interests of (industrial) workers (Bartolini and Mair 2007).

While existing research still finds that individuals with a working-class background are slightly more likely than those in other occupational groups to support social democratic parties in elections,³ the key constituency of these parties has changed. In adopting a more differentiated social class scheme, Rennwald (2020, p. 63) shows that German Social Democrats were able to mobilise production workers in the 1970s but failed to do so in the 2010s. Those who were employed in the public sector were, by contrast, more likely to support social democratic parties than were industrial or production workers in the last 20 years (Gingrich and Häusermann 2015; Benedetto et al. 2020, p. 938). At the same time, individuals from working-class households became increasingly supportive of far-right, anti-immigrant parties (see Arzheimer and Carter 2006; see also the contributions in Rydgen 2013).

This pattern is not necessarily new. Lipset (1959) has already argued that authoritarian values are widespread among the working class, so working-class voters could feel better represented by conservative parties or parties from the far right if societal policy issues dominate the election campaign or the public discourse. Right-wing populist parties may also appeal to working-class voters because their restrictive stance on immigration aligns with working-class voters' economic interests. Because they are more vulnerable to competition from low-skilled immigration in terms of jobs and suppressed wages (e.g. Helbling and Kriesi 2014; Naumann et al. 2018), they might find their interests represented by right-wing populists. In her comparative study on social democratic parties and the working class, Rennwald (2020, pp. 83–84) shows that even within the social democratic electorate, production workers show a stronger anti-immigration position than the average social democratic voter.

If a party with such a policy profile of chauvinistic welfare positions, restrictive immigration and integration policies, and societally traditionalist policy positions is competing for votes, and if a polarising topic like migration and integration is on the top of the list of the most important problems, then we should see increasing support for such a right-wing populist party among workers. This should particularly be the case if the respective social democratic party adopts an economically centre-left and societally progressive policy profile with a permissive immigration policy. Given that social democratic parties in Europe retained moderate state-interventionist positions on economic policies and accepted the need for further austerity policies (Bremer 2018), and that social democrats—despite some variation across countries—adopted

³ The Social Democrats won 32% among workers in the 2013 *Bundestag* election, while receiving the support of 25.7% of all voters. In 2017, 23% of workers who participated in the election voted SPD, which implies that the difference between the total SPD vote share (20.5%) and the party's support among workers clearly decreased within 4 years. At the same time, the support for the AfD among workers increased from 6% in 2013 to 21% in 2017, while winning 4.7% and 12.6% among all voters, respectively. By contrast, in 1976—when the SPD received 42.6% of the votes—56% of workers voted for the Social Democrats (data taken from Debus and Müller 2020, p. 450, and Infratest dimap 2017). These patterns indicate also that the German Social Democrats, similar to several European social democratic parties, cannot be described as a pure working-class movement (Rennwald 2020, p. 46), given that more than 40% of the workers voted for other parties, in particular for the Christian Democrats.

increasingly liberal positions on sociocultural issues (Abou-Chadi and Wagner 2021, pp. 253–254), such a programmatic profile should result in increased distances and alienation between individuals with a working-class background and the respective social democratic party.

3 Research Design

3.1 Case

The German case in the 2010s is an ideal example for evaluating this argument and, thus, the existence of new patterns of class voting, such that workers—even those who previously were close to the Social Democrats—should be more likely to switch to a right-wing populist party because of a cultural conflict (Oesch and Rennwald 2018; Rennwald 2020). The programmatic profile of the right-wing populist AfD changed significantly in 2015. Whereas the AfD started with a Eurosceptic profile containing mostly (fiscally) conservative issues and positions in 2013, it turned into an anti-immigrant party with societally conservative and chauvinistic welfare positions in the 2017 election campaign. We therefore expect that former supporters of centre to centre-right parties chose the AfD in 2013 (and maybe less in 2017), while workers, including the ones who previously supported the Social Democrats, should have favoured the AfD in 2017 because of their newly adopted profile that combined negative stances on immigration and immigrants with welfare chauvinism and social conservatism. Because of the higher stability of an individual's party identification compared to vote choice (e.g. Dalton 2016; Bremer and Rennwald 2023), we expect that workers with a previous SPD identification should have been less likely to switch to the AfD in 2017 than workers who voted for the SPD in 2013.

3.2 Sample

Our analysis is based on data from the GSOEP survey project. The objective of the GSOEP is to collect information on the living conditions of the German population and to make the data available for basic scientific research (Wagner et al. 2007). In addition to the high methodological quality standards, the SOEP data are suitable for the study because of the large number of respondents, which allows us to study a reasonable sample size of partisans with working-class status. Specifically, the following analysis uses pooled information from the core SOEP dataset (<https://doi.org/10.5684/soep.core.v37eu>) and combines this dataset with more specific SOEP waves that provide information on the ethnic background of the respondents (based on the ppathl dataset) and on the region where the respondents live (by using the regional dataset). This information is necessary since we know from existing studies that AfD support is stronger among individuals who were socialised in eastern Germany and among those who have a so-called Russian–German background (e.g. Goerres et al. 2020; Spies et al. 2022).

3.3 Time Period

In contrast to Bischof and Kurer (2024), who adopted a long-term and comparative perspective and focused on changes in party identification over time, we concentrate on the waves conducted in the years 2014 and 2018 only, which results in a total of 22,441 respondents in 2014 and 23,147 in 2018. We focus on the 2014 and 2018 waves because the GSOEP asked a retrospective voting question for the *Bundestag* elections in 2013 and 2017. This allows for evaluating whether the AfD voters in 2013 and 2017 had different backgrounds and came from the group of nonaffiliated voters or from former supporters and identifiers of other parties. Furthermore, because the programmatic profile of the AfD changed considerably during that time from a Eurosceptic, fiscally and socially conservative party to a right-wing populist, anti-immigrant party with strong extremist elements (see Arzheimer 2015; Berbuir et al. 2015; Gessler and Hunger 2021; Debus and Florczak 2022; Atzpodien 2022), we are able to evaluate whether former supporters of the SPD, in particular if they had a working-class background, were more likely to vote for the AfD in 2017 and thus when the party highlighted anti-immigrant positions.

3.4 Key Measures

Testing our argument requires us to track party identification and vote choice over time. Our dependent variable is the respondents' party choice in the 2013 and 2017 *Bundestag* election, including abstainers (that is, respondents who said that they did not vote). Because we are interested in the determinants of who chose the AfD in the *Bundestag* elections, we created a simple dummy variable that measures who voted AfD in 2013 and 2017 or did not.

To evaluate whether SPD voters in 2013 who had a working-class background were more likely to switch to the AfD 4 years later, we interacted the variable that provides information on the working-class background of an individual with the information on whether the respective respondent voted SPD in 2013. In a second step and to evaluate whether previous party identification with the Social Democrats made workers less likely to switch to the AfD, we made use of the GSOEP waves conducted up to 5 years before the 2014 and 2018 waves, respectively, to measure whether respondents with German citizenship were affiliated with a party previously and thus had identified with one of the major parties at least once in a time span of three (or five) years, respectively.⁴

Our explanatory variables reflect standard theories and approaches of the analysis of individual voting behaviour. We have information on the respondents' participation and voting behaviour in the 2013 election, so we can estimate which party voters in 2013 were more likely to switch to the AfD in 2017. Furthermore, we can estimate if those respondents who said that they abstained from voting in 2013 or were not allowed to vote in that year were more (or less) likely to support the AfD. The GSOEP data allow for measuring a respondent's party identification, so

⁴ To check the robustness of the results, we focused on the previous party identification of the respondents not only for a period of three years but also for a period of five years (see the online appendix).

we can incorporate the core concept of the Michigan School of analysis of voting behaviour (Campbell et al. 1960) in the analysis. Based on the information provided by this variable along with the GSOEP waves we use, we measure not only whether respondents considered themselves to be AfD identifiers in the election years 2013 and 2017, but we could also identify those respondents who never mentioned having a party identification in the three (or five) years before the election, respectively, and those who said in the previous SOEP waves that they identified themselves at least once—except for the election years of the 2013 and 2017—with the SPD, the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU), the Free Democratic Party (FDP), the Greens, or the socialist Left Party.⁵ Furthermore, we include a variable in the analysis that provides information about the working-class background of a respondent in the respective election year (based on the information on the current occupational background of a respondent as a trained or nontrained worker or foreman), as well as variables that cover information concerning whether the respondent was self-employed or a civil servant. On the basis of this coding decision, 12.5% of the sample in 2014 and 12% in 2018 had a working-class background; 21.9% ($N=537$) and 19.6% ($N=442$) among this group indicated that they voted for the Social Democrats in 2013 and 2017, and 2.5% ($N=61$) and 14.7% ($N=331$) said that they selected the candidates of the AfD in the elections, respectively.

3.5 Controls

We control for the age of a respondent, the education background, and sex (see Schmitt-Beck 2017). Furthermore, we include information on the status of being unemployed and on the specific migrant background of the respondents, which might have influenced their chances of voting for the AfD because of its anti-immigrant positions, particularly in 2017. In so doing, we identify respondents who were born in the states that belonged to the former Soviet Union because these individuals are likely to be so-called German resettlers (*Spätaussiedler*) who tend to have more traditional and authoritarian attitudes and should therefore be more likely to support the AfD (see Debus et al. 2024). Furthermore, we identify respondents who were born in an African state or in a Muslim-majority country. These individuals belong to the group of people whom the AfD attacks because of its negative positions on Islam and migration, so we expect that the variable identifying respondents who were born in Africa and/or the Muslim world are less likely to support the AfD. Because the support for anti-establishment parties like the AfD, particularly if they adopt a right-wing populist profile, depends also on nonpolitical attitudes of respondents (e.g. Kriesi et al. 2006; Mudde 2007; Margalit 2012; Schmitt-Beck 2017), we control for general trust. Finally, we include a dummy variable in the regression models that identify respondents who were born in eastern Germany, where the AfD is particularly successful.⁶

⁵ See Bremer and Rennwald (2023) for a detailed analysis and discussion about the relationship between party identification and vote choice of individuals leaning towards social democratic parties.

⁶ We refrain from including labour union membership as an explanatory variable in the analysis because information on labour union membership of the respondents is available from the GSOEP waves conducted

3.6 Statistical Analysis

Because we are interested in the chances that former SPD voters and identifiers with a working-class background chose the AfD in the 2017 election when the AfD had adopted an anti-immigrant policy profile, we interact the variables that tag former SPD voters and party identifiers with information on the question regarding whether the respondents in the respective election year had a working-class background.

We thus estimate six regression models, which include explanatory variables that cover information on a respondent's previous voting behaviour and previous party identification for SPD, CDU/CSU, Greens, the FDP, or the Left over the three (or five; see the online appendix) years before the respective election. While the first and third models in Table 1 and the first model in Table 2 do not include any interaction effect and thus focus on the effects of previous voting behaviour, party identification, and working-class background on voting AfD, we interact in the respective second models and in the fourth model the working-class background of a respondent with information on their vote for the SPD in 2013 or their previous SPD identification. When analysing the determinants of AfD vote choice in 2013 (see Table 2), we can only look at the effects of previous party identifications of voters and not on previous voting behaviour in the 2009 *Bundestag* election because voting behaviour was only asked retrospectively in the 2014 and 2018 GSOEP waves, respectively. Given the binary coded dependent variable, we estimate simple logit models with the covariates discussed in the previous subsections.

4 Results

4.1 A First Descriptive Look

Before presenting the main results, we provide a brief descriptive analysis. Figure 1 demonstrates that a clear majority of respondents who voted SPD in 2013 also chose the Social Democrats 4 years later, regardless of their occupational background. However, the share of AfD voters in 2017 was higher among workers (11.3%) than among nonworkers (2.8%) who voted SPD in 2013. These results indicate that the AfD gained not only among workers in general but also among those individuals with a working-class background who supported the SPD in 2013, and thus the party that traditionally represents the interests of workers and of individuals from low-income groups.

Do we find similar results for individuals who considered themselves close to the Social Democrats in the years before the 2017 *Bundestag* election? And are there different patterns when comparing the support of former SPD identifiers with a working-class background for the AfD in the 2017 election, when the AfD was a clearly far-right and populist party, with the 2013 *Bundestag* election and thus

in 2011 and 2015, thus three years before the surveys conducted in 2014 and 2018, respectively. Including information on the labour union membership of a respondent in 2011 and 2015 does not substantively affect the main results of the study.

when the AfD was mostly seen as a fiscally and socially conservative as well as Eurosceptic party? The results presented in Fig. 2 indicate that this is the case. Unsurprisingly, support for the SPD was lower in the case of voters who did not consider themselves Social Democrats in the three years before the 2017 election than it was for voters who said that they once considered themselves close to the SPD. What is important to note is that the support for the SPD was *lower* among respondents with a *working-class background* compared to respondents from other occupational groups (this is in line with the findings of Benedetto et al. 2020). Even more importantly, the results in Fig. 2 indicate that support for the AfD among former SPD identifiers with a working-class background clearly increased in 2017. We do not observe a similar substantive change in AfD support among former SPD identifiers from other occupational groups. Respondents who did not identify themselves with the SPD in the three years before the 2017 election increased their support for the AfD to a higher degree. This is, however, only the case for workers and not for respondents with a different occupational background.

We do not observe similar patterns for the 2013 election: Neither workers who previously identified as Social Democrats nor workers without a previous SPD PI supported the AfD more than other political options in the 2013 *Bundestag* election. These findings suggest that not only workers in general but also workers who identified with the SPD in the years before the 2017 election were more likely to switch to the AfD in 2017 and thus when the AfD explicitly adopted a far-right and anti-immigrant policy profile.

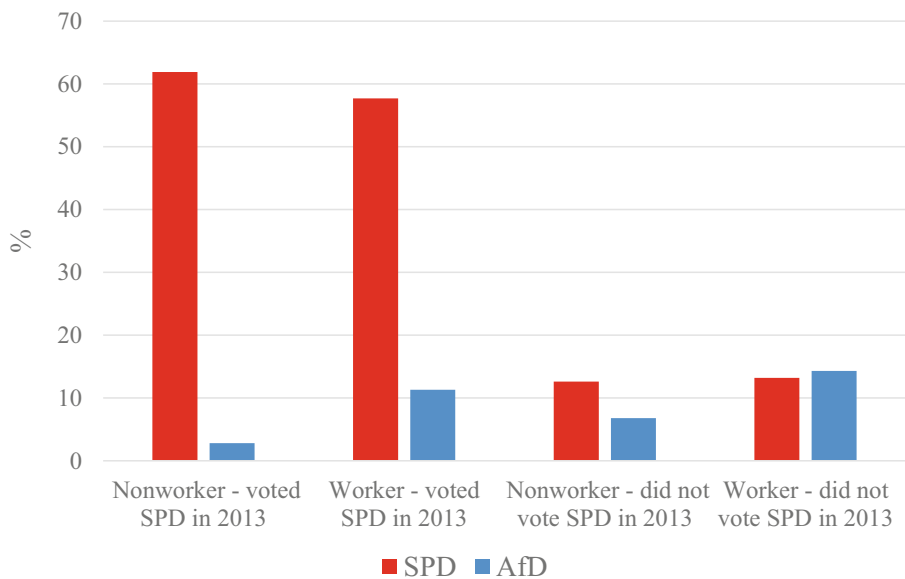


Fig. 1 Support for the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Alternative for Germany (AfD) in the 2017 *Bundestag* elections in percentages, differentiated between the status as workers and SPD vote choice in the 2013 *Bundestag* election

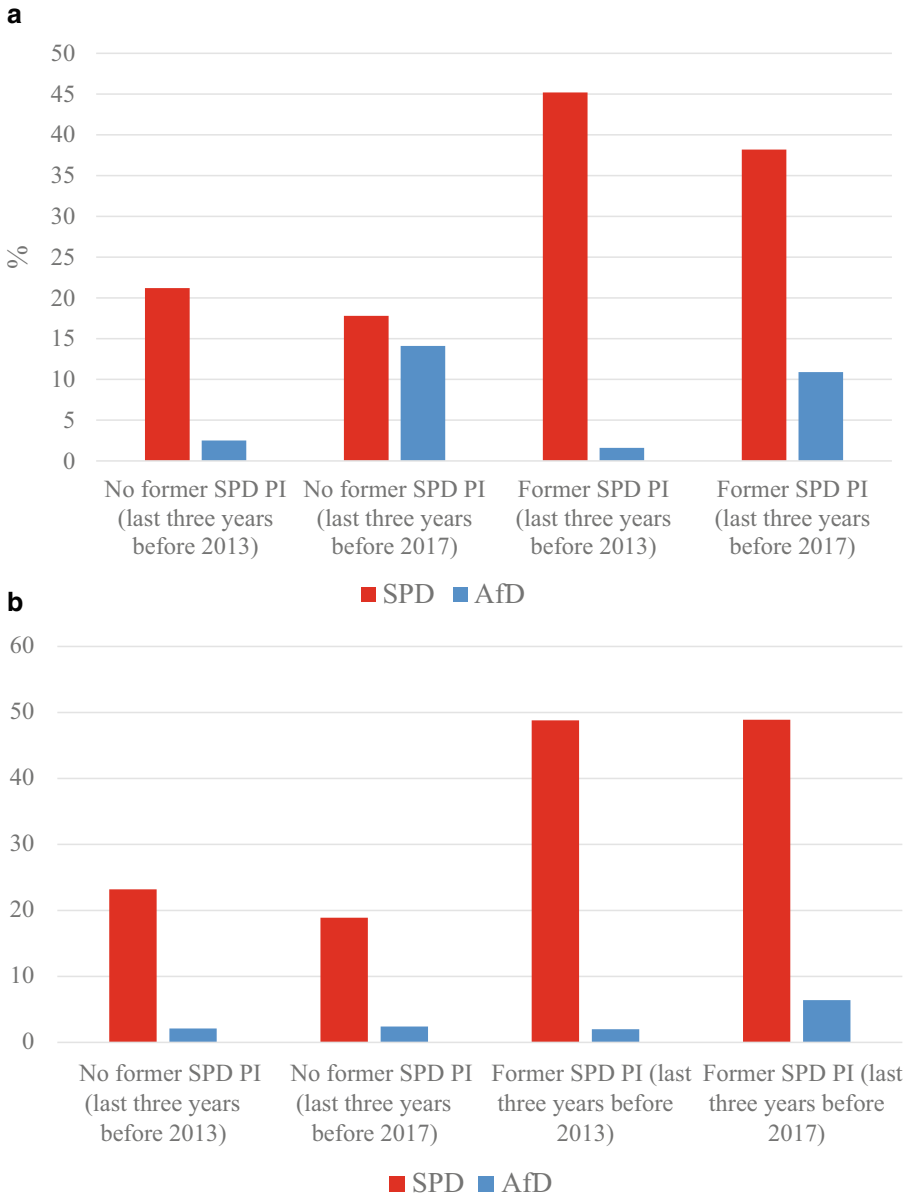


Fig. 2 Support for the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Alternative for Germany (AfD) in the 2017 and 2013 *Bundestag* elections in percentages, differentiated by former SPD party identification (PI) in the three years before the respective election. **a** Workers. **b** Nonworkers

4.2 Main Results

Table 1 presents the results of four regression models that estimate the determinants of choosing the AfD in the 2017 *Bundestag* election. We find that—even when controlling for a battery of further factors that influence voting behaviour in general and of support for right-wing populist parties in elections in particular—respondents had a higher chance to have voted AfD in 2017 if they were workers, and they had a lower chance to have chosen the AfD compared to other options if they had voted SPD in 2013 (see models 1 and 2). However, the interaction term between SPD vote choice in 2013 and occupational status as a worker has a positive effect, indicating that workers who voted for the Social Democrats four years ago were more likely to support the AfD in 2017 than former SPD voters without a working-class background.

Although an individual's party identification should be more stable than their vote choice, we observe a similar pattern when focusing on previous SPD identifiers (see models 3 and 4 in Table 1). Respondents who had no party identification in 2017 but had an affiliation with the SPD at least once in the three years previously were less likely to support the AfD, but workers with a previous SPD party identification were more likely to support the AfD in the 2017 election.

Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the substantive results of the interaction effect between the status as a worker and a previous SPD voting behaviour (Fig. 3) or a former SPD identification (Fig. 4), respectively. Workers were more likely to vote AfD than any other option in 2017, regardless of whether they had previously voted SPD or identified themselves with the Social Democrats. Previously supporting the SPD—either based on voting for the Social Democrats in the previous election or by feeling closely aligned with the SPD on the basis of the party identification concept—did not prevent workers, as the traditional core voter clientele of Social Democrats, from voting for parties on the radical right. This indicates also that this specific segment of former SPD supporters switched to a significant degree to the AfD if they considered themselves as not affiliated with any party in the election year. This is evidence for an indirect voter migration.

In terms of the further variables included in the models, we find that former identifiers of the socialist Left Party were more likely to support the AfD than other options in 2017 (models 3 and 4). Given the populist character of both parties, this finding is not surprising and indicates that left- and right-wing parties are attractive for similar groups of voters, which contributes to the explanation of why the split of the Left Party and the foundation of the left-authoritarian BSW is successful at the polls (Wagner et al. 2023). While neither former supporters of the Christian Democrats nor those of the liberal FDP were more likely to select the AfD in the 2017 *Bundestag* election, former Green party identifiers were significantly less likely to support the AfD, which suggests that Greens and AfD represent the extreme of a new conflict line in modern societies that differentiates between libertarian–cosmopolitan positions on the one side and traditionalist–communitarian positions on the other (Kriesi et al. 2006; de Vries et al. 2013; de Vries 2018; Bornschier et al. 2021). Female respondents were, as expected, less likely to vote AfD in 2017, as was the case for people with a high degree of education and for civil

Table 1 Determinants of Alternative for Germany (AfD) vote choice, *Bundestag* election 2017

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	Previous voting behaviour		Previous PID (last 3 years)	
AfD PID	4.867** (0.122)	4.872** (0.122)	5.641** (0.135)	5.642** (0.135)
Voted SPD in 2013	-0.677** (0.125)	-0.852** (0.143)	-	-
Worker	0.545** (0.094)	0.472** (0.098)	0.488** (0.094)	0.450** (0.096)
Voted SPD in 2013 × Worker	-	0.809** (0.268)	-	-
Voted CDU/CSU in 2013	-0.307** (0.097)	-0.315** (0.097)	-	-
Voted The Left in 2013	0.062 (0.154)	0.060 (0.154)	-	-
Voted FDP in 2013	-0.526 (0.330)	-0.534 (0.330)	-	-
Voted Greens in 2013	-1.469** (0.288)	-1.482** (0.288)	-	-
Abstained from voting in 2013	0.308** (0.096)	0.314** (0.096)	-	-
Not allowed to vote in 2013	-0.046 (0.344)	-0.038 (0.343)	-	-
Previous SPD PID	-	-	-0.433* (0.181)	-0.662** (0.222)
Previous CDU/CSU PID	-	-	0.049 (0.138)	0.045 (0.138)
Previous The Left PID	-	-	0.409+ (0.219)	0.406+ (0.219)
Previous FDP PID	-	-	-1.019 (0.718)	-1.041 (0.718)
Previous Greens PID	-	-	-1.290** (0.454)	-1.291** (0.454)
No PID previously	-	-	1.205** (0.084)	1.209** (0.084)
Previous SPD PID × Worker	-	-	-	0.899* (0.391)
Civil servants	-0.594* (0.235)	-0.589* (0.236)	-0.589* (0.237)	-0.590* (0.237)
Self employed	0.028 (0.157)	0.026 (0.157)	0.078 (0.157)	0.076 (0.157)
Female	-0.324** (0.068)	-0.322** (0.068)	-0.390** (0.069)	-0.392** (0.069)
Age	0.007** (0.002)	0.007** (0.002)	0.006** (0.002)	0.006** (0.002)

Table 1 (Continued)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	Previous voting behaviour		Previous PID (last 3 years)	
University degree	-1.561** (0.414)	-1.566** (0.415)	-1.456** (0.411)	-1.459** (0.411)
Without employment	-0.231** (0.088)	-0.228** (0.088)	-0.155+ (0.088)	-0.154+ (0.088)
General trust high–low	0.461** (0.050)	0.457** (0.050)	0.427** (0.050)	0.425** (0.050)
Born in the former East Germany	0.652** (0.076)	0.650** (0.076)	0.591** (0.076)	0.591** (0.076)
Born in the former Soviet Union	0.685** (0.134)	0.696** (0.134)	0.632** (0.133)	0.633** (0.133)
Born in Africa and/or the Muslim world	-2.069** (0.522)	-2.071** (0.521)	-1.980** (0.526)	-1.986** (0.525)
Constant	-4.458** (0.172)	-4.446** (0.172)	-5.181** (0.183)	-5.174** (0.183)
<i>N</i>	23147	23147	23147	23147
<i>AIC</i>	7564.540	7558.176	7398.305	7395.416
Log likelihood	-3762.270	-3758.088	-3680.153	-3677.708

The dependent variable is the reported AfD vote choice in the 2017 *Bundestag* election. Analyses include only respondents with German citizenship. Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. *PID* party identification, *SPD* Social Democratic Party, *CDU/CSU* Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union, *FDP* Free Democratic Party

+ $p \leq 0.1$, * $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$

servants. Support for the AfD tended to increase with the respondents' ages and with a lower amount of general trust that they had. Further, individuals born in East Germany and in the former Soviet Union, who were most likely so-called German resettlers, were significantly more likely to support the AfD in the 2017 federal election. Respondents who were born in African or Muslim-majority countries were, by contrast, less likely to support the AfD in 2017, which is not surprising given the anti-immigrant and anti-Islam profile of the AfD. These findings remain substantively the same when the time frame for identifying previous party attachments is widened from three years to five years before the 2017 election (Tables A1 and A2 and Figs. A1 and A2 in the online appendix).

Given that the programmatic profile of the AfD was different in 2013 from the one in 2017 when the party focused more on issues related to European integration and economic and financial policy before becoming a far-right-wing populist party with an anti-immigrant profile (Arzheimer and Berning 2019), we make use of the party's programmatic change to evaluate whether workers who previously identified with the SPD were among the social groups who were more likely to support the AfD when the party was less extreme on migration and immigration issues and instead adopted a socially and fiscally conservative profile. The results of the regression models presented in Table 2 indicate that neither former SPD identifiers nor workers in general were more likely to support the AfD than other options in

Fig. 3 Estimated probability to vote for the Alternative for Germany in 2017, differentiated by worker status and Social Democratic Party (SPD) voting in 2013 (based on model 2 from Table 1). Bars indicate 95% confidence intervals

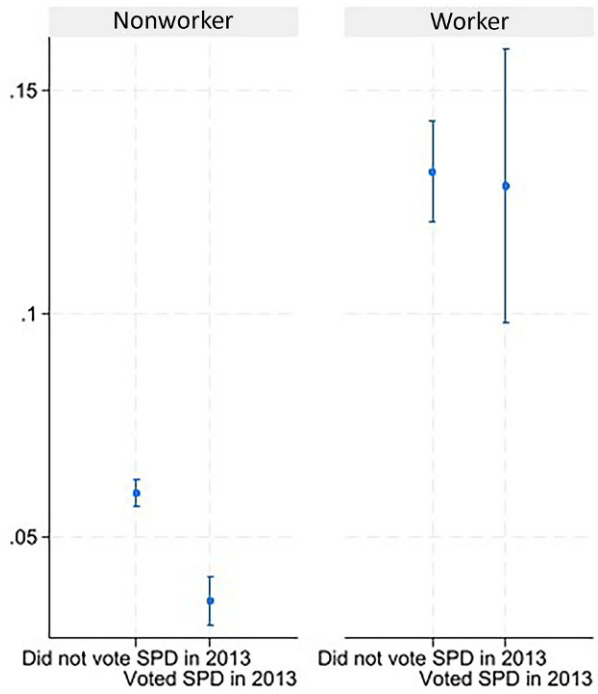


Fig. 4 Estimated probability to vote for the Alternative for Germany in 2017, differentiated by worker status and Social Democratic Party (SPD) identification in the previous three years (based on model 4 from Table 1). Bars indicate 95% confidence intervals

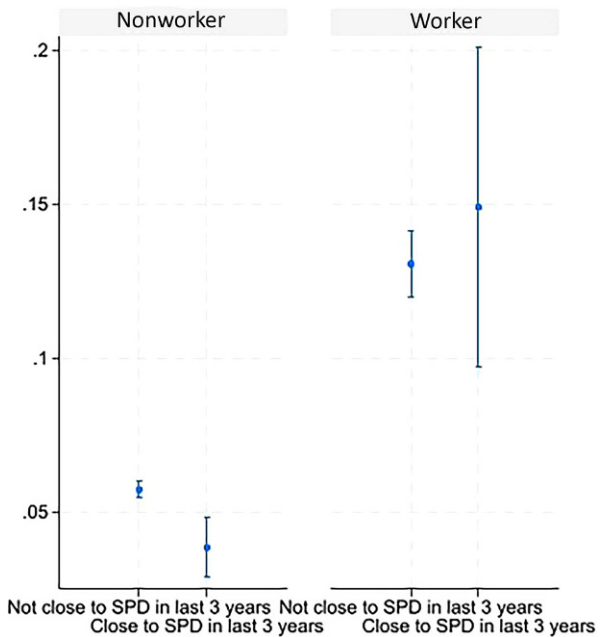


Table 2 Determinants of Alternative for Germany (AfD) vote choice, *Bundestag* election 2013

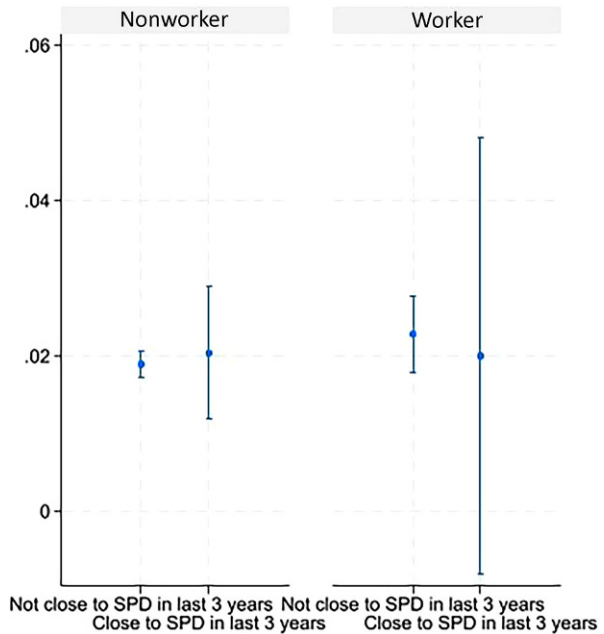
	Model 1	Model 2
	Previous PID (last 3 years before election)	
AfD PID	5.835** (0.194)	5.835** (0.194)
Previous SPD PID	0.073 (0.281)	0.097 (0.292)
Worker	-0.167 (0.178)	-0.159 (0.180)
Previous SPD PID × Worker	- -	-0.280 (1.061)
Previous CDU/CSU PID	0.336 (0.246)	0.336 (0.246)
Previous The Left PID	-1.237 (1.007)	-1.234 (1.007)
Previous FDP PID	-0.040 (0.721)	-0.040 (0.721)
Previous Greens PID	0.428 (0.316)	0.428 (0.316)
No PID previously	0.981** (0.126)	0.980** (0.126)
Civil servants	0.490* (0.228)	0.490* (0.228)
Self employed	0.223 (0.214)	0.224 (0.214)
Female	-0.311** (0.114)	-0.311** (0.114)
Age	-0.001 (0.004)	-0.001 (0.004)
University degree	-0.065 (0.375)	-0.066 (0.375)
Without employment	-0.430** (0.150)	-0.430** (0.150)
Born in the former East Germany	-1.387 (1.086)	-1.381 (1.087)
Born in the former Soviet Union	0.091 (0.140)	0.091 (0.140)
Born in Africa and/or the Muslim world	-0.092 (0.373)	-0.093 (0.373)
Constant	-4.480** (0.210)	-4.480** (0.210)
<i>N</i>	22,441	22,441

Table 2 (Continued)

	Model 1	Model 2
	Previous PID (last 3 years before election)	
<i>AIC</i>	3284.737	3286.662
Log likelihood	-1624.369	-1624.331

The dependent variable is the reported AfD vote choice in the 2013 *Bundestag* election. Analyses include only respondents with German citizenship. Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. *PID* party identification, *SPD* Social Democratic Party, *CDU/CSU* Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union, *FDP* Free Democratic Party
⁺ $p < 0.1$, ^{*} $p < 0.05$, ^{**} $p < 0.01$

Fig. 5 Estimated probability to vote for the Alternative for Germany in 2013, differentiated by worker status and Social Democratic Party (SPD) identification in the previous three years (based on model 2 from Table 2). Bars indicate 95% confidence intervals



2013; also, the interaction term between both variables does not show significant results (Fig. 5). Instead, the voters of the AfD were not affiliated with any party in the three or five years before the 2013 election. When focusing on the 5-year period of previous party identification (Tables A1 and A2 and Figs. A1 and A2 in the online appendix), we find that former FDP supporters were more likely than other supporters to choose the AfD in 2013, whereas there is no effect of former identification with the Green party. Along these lines, the results show that—in clear contrast to 2017—civil servants were more likely than other occupational groups to support the AfD in 2013 and that the degree of education did not matter. Furthermore, ethnic background and the German east–west divide did not correlate with the AfD vote in 2013. Given the programmatic change of the AfD, these findings indicate that the right-wing populist and anti-immigrant profile that the AfD adopted in 2015 made the party more attractive for workers, even if they had previously a close attachment to the SPD.

5 Conclusions and Implications

The aim of this research note was to evaluate whether working-class voters, particularly those who previously considered themselves as Social Democrats, were more likely to support radical right and populist parties in recent elections. We argued that it is important to focus not only on *direct* migration but also on *indirect* migration between parties. By this, we mean the possibility to consider oneself as unaffiliated or independent before switching to a new party. Based on GSOEP panel data, we found that individuals with a working-class background who previously voted SPD or even considered themselves as SPD identifiers were not immune to voting for the AfD in 2017. Instead, they were as likely to support the AfD in this election as working-class individuals without a previous SPD vote or party identification (e.g. Arzheimer and Carter 2006). This indicates that the German Social Democrats indeed lost former supporters from their traditional core voter clientele to a radical-right party when those voters made previously a stopover as voters who were not affiliated with any party. However, former SPD identifiers with a working-class background were more likely to support the AfD only in 2017 and not in 2013. This means that former Social Democrats with a working-class background were more likely to switch to a right-wing populist party when this party highlighted anti-immigrant issues and adopted antic cosmopolitan and traditionalist positions (as was the case for the German AfD in the 2017 election campaign).

These findings have implications not only for the programmatic strategies of social democratic parties but more generally for the stability of liberal democracies and their political institutions. If social democratic parties highlight restrictive immigration policies (as they did in Denmark in 2019 and in the *Burgenland* regional elections in Austria in 2020 and 2025) and abandon a completely progressive agenda, chances for winning back former supporters from the working class may increase. This could also result in less increasing, or even decreasing, support for right-wing populist parties. However, this would come at the cost of losing their current supporters who do not prefer restrictive migration policies and who favour progressive policies to parties like the Greens or other left-libertarian parties (Abou-Chadi and Wagner 2019, 2024; Bischof and Kurer 2024; Polacko 2022). This dilemma certainly deserves more attention in future research, for example by integrating information on the self-identification of individuals as members of the working class (Westheuser and Lux 2024). In addition, Rennwald (2020) and Etzerodt and Kongshøj (2022) argue and show empirically that the Danish Social Democrats, who actually did not increase their vote share significantly, might have been successful not because of the rather restrictive immigration policy but instead for emphasising a traditional social democratic agenda on socioeconomic issues, i.e. pledging the expansion of the welfare state. Furthermore, adopting the policy profile of far-right parties and, thus, anti-immigrant positions risks normalising right-wing extremist parties' positions (Valentim 2024) and is likely to increase the electoral support for these parties (Krause et al. 2023), which would then decrease the stability of liberal democracies even more.

Given the affinity of working-class individuals for authoritarian and anti-immigrant positions (Rennwald 2020), the question remains concerning which party can

make credible policy offers to this group of voters. If the Social Democrats or other moderate parties from the centre-right or centre-left are not successful in this regard, then workers, even those with a previous close relationship with the SPD, will continue to be mobilised and vote for parties of the radical right such as the AfD. As the recent state elections in eastern Germany in 2024 and the following complex government formation processes have shown, increasing support for the AfD is likely to destabilise representative democracy and its institutions. It is thus an important normative and empirical question which of the moderate parties that support the principles of liberal democracies will be able to win back voters with a working-class background by catering to the preferences and interests of this social group.

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