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The Rise of Extreme Parties in Eastern Germany

Following the conclusion of the Second World War Germany was divided by the victorious allies. In the West, the Federal Republic of Germany was established in the model of the democratic of Western Europe. In the East, the German Democratic Republic was founded in the model of the Soviet system under the rule of the Socialist Unity Party. When the Cold War came to a close Eastern Germany underwent the Peaceful Revolution which would culminate in the reunification of the German state under the government of the victorious West. However, the East was economically behind the West and this has held true even now thirty years later. In addition the East has become a stronghold of the extreme parties of Germany. This led to the opening question of how have these parties risen over time and can their rise be explained by the economic tale of Eastern Germany?

For this analysis, I used three sources for my data. I originally found a dataset on the Harvard Dataverse which had the election results by constituency for every Bundestag (lower chamber of the German parliament) election since 1949. Firstly, I converted it from a .tab file into a CSV through excel so that I could use it in R. For my data I cut it down to start in 1990 (when Germany reunified) and selected for the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism) and Die Linke for the left parties since the PDS would become Die Linke. For the right I selected for the NPD, which is a fringe far right party, and the AfD which was founded in 2013 and has seen success in the East as a far right party. In my analysis, I then grouped them by region using the different states. For this analysis, I excluded Berlin due to it being divided during the Cold War and its general difference from the rest of Eastern Germany. Another source of data was from the

Annual Report on German Unity that the German government puts out. This gave me some useful economic data on the differences between the East and West which I used to contrast the GDP per Capita as well the disposable incomes between the two. For the disposable income and GDP per capita data sets I put them together myself with the data provided by the report. Finally, I found a dataset of the GDPs of each state in Germany on the database of the Federal Statistical Office of Germany which I used to contrast average state GDPs between the East and West.

In my analysis, I first wanted to simply visualize the share of votes different extremes got in different states in different elections (See Figures 1-4). This showed clearly that these extreme parties do better in the East than in the West. It also demonstrated that the far right gained a lot of ground over time. Next, I combined the left and right in order to show the rise of extremes in the East and West more generally which reinforced that they did clearly better in the East and were rising (See Figure 5). After this, I wanted to quickly glance at the composition of the extremes in the East (See Figure 6). The resulting graph shows that the left peaked in the late 2000s and has since declined almost to the level they held at Reunification. The Right by contrast has been growing quickly ever since the founding of the AfD and in the most recent Bundestag election (2021) garnered more support than the left in the East. Moving on the Economic story I included a graph of the rise of extremes in the East (Figure 7) and then graphed the disparity in GDP per Capita to show that since 1995 there has been an increasing disparity with the West having more per capita than the East (Figure 8). Another economic factor I wanted to show was disposable income, so I created a graph showing the disposable income of the East and West (Figure 9). This illustrates a clear and continuous gap between the two. I then created another graph about disposable income this time graphing the disparity over time (Figure 10). Moving onto the final economic factor I wished to analyze, I created a graph showing the

average state GDP in the East and West which was far more extreme than the previous economic factors (Figure 11). While both have risen steadily the West is on average far more productive than the East and has had a faster growth rate as well. This graph clearly shows the disparity in economic strength between these two regions of Germany. I then, as I have done previously, also graphed the difference over time which has shown that the disparity has been getting larger and larger over time since Reunification. Finally, I created a correlation graph between the vote share of extreme parties in the East and the average state GDP difference (Figure 13). So far it seemed that these economic factors and the rise of extremes may be lining up but I wanted to be sure. This graph demonstrates a correlation of 0.837350443008802. It seems from this that the two are positively correlated.

I sought out at the start to analyze the rise of extremes in Eastern Germany following Reunification and the associated economic factors. This analysis has shown the rise of the far right particularly in the East as well as the story of a region seemingly left behind. While from such brief research and analysis, it seems impossible to safely declare what is causing this rise it seems that extremism is rising mainly in the East and is potentially correlated with the growing disparity between the East and the West. This is an interesting topic and one political scientists would do well to understand as Germany sees the rise of these extremes especially on the right.
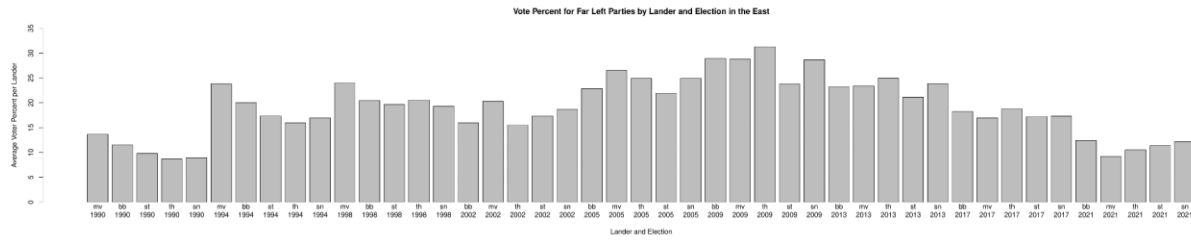
Figures

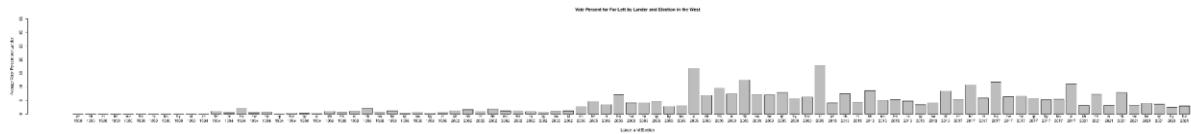Figure 1 (Vote Percent for Far Left Parties by Lander & Election in the East)

Figure 2 (Vote Percent for Far Left Parties by Lander & Election in the West)
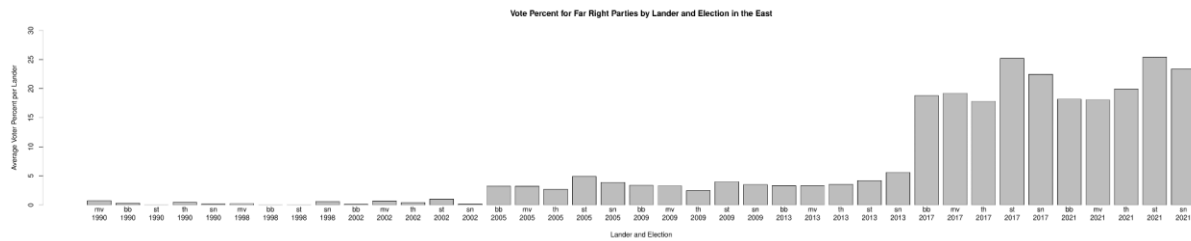

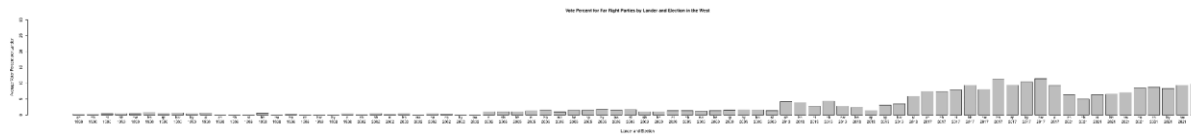Figure 3 (Vote Percent for Far Right Parties by Lander & Election in the East)

Figure 4 (Vote Percent for Far Right Parties by Lander & Election in the West)

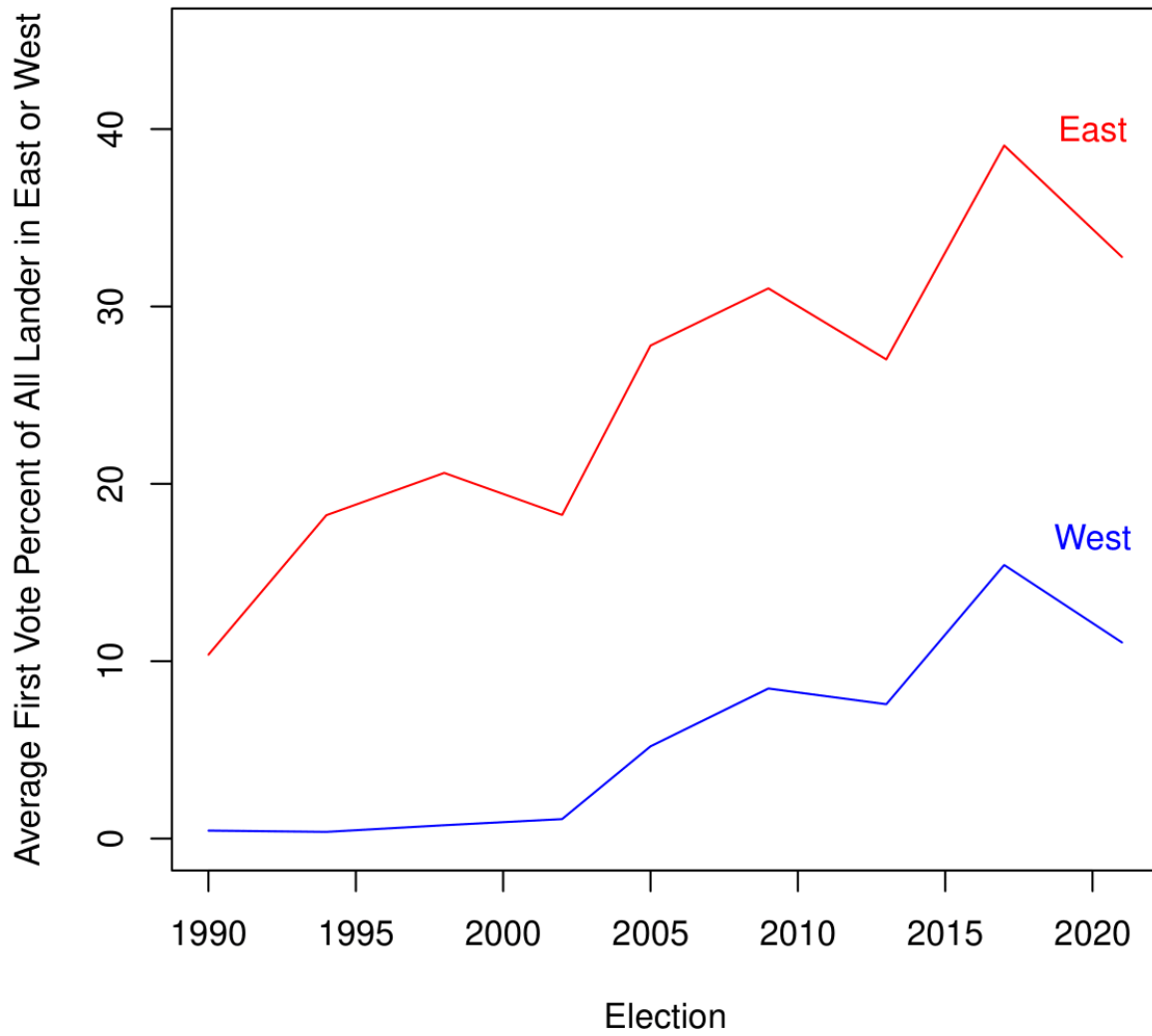# First Vote Percent of Extreme Parties over Time

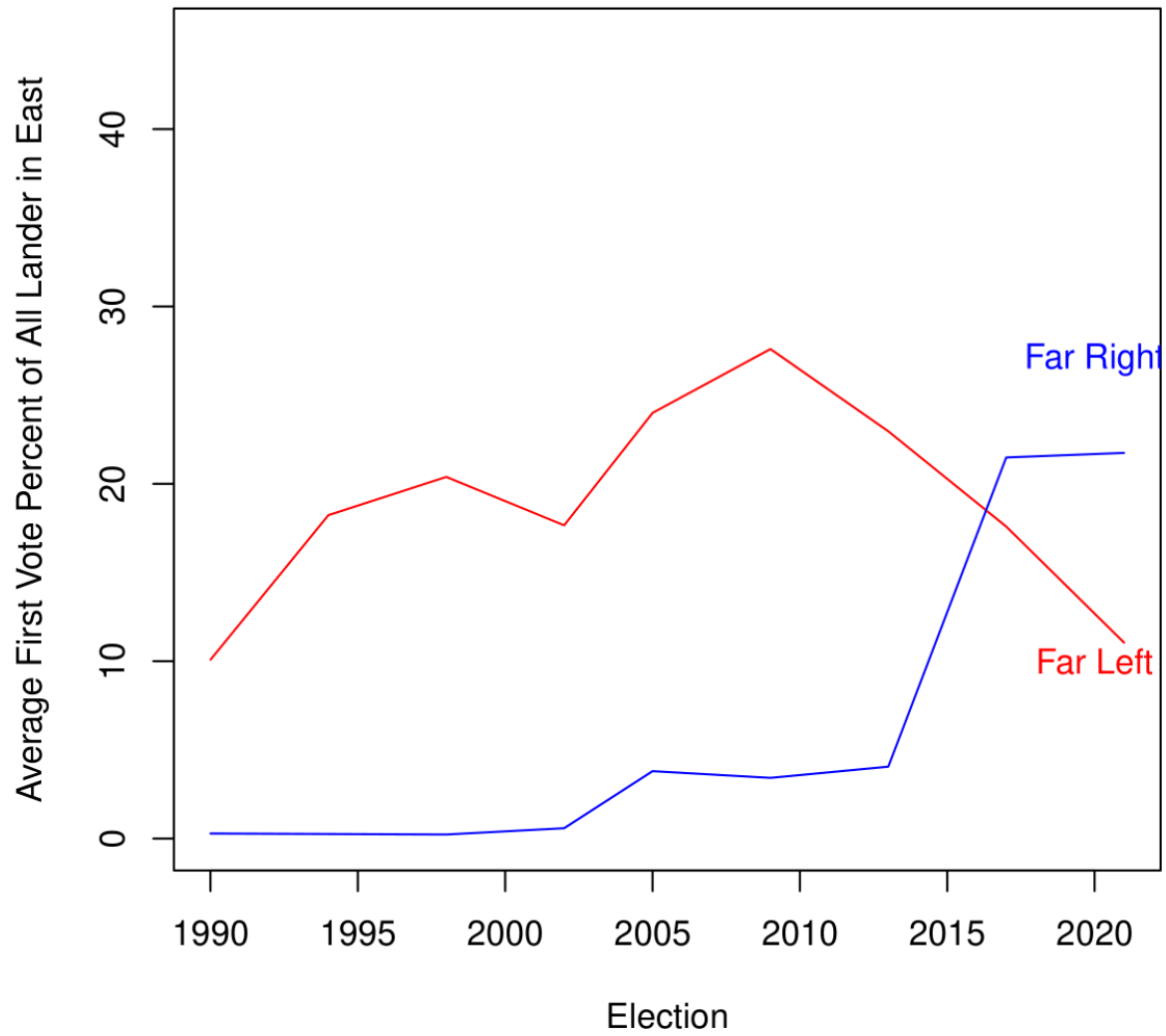Figure 5 (Rise of Extremes in East vs West)

First Vote Percent over Time in the East

Figure 6 (Composition of Extremes in East)

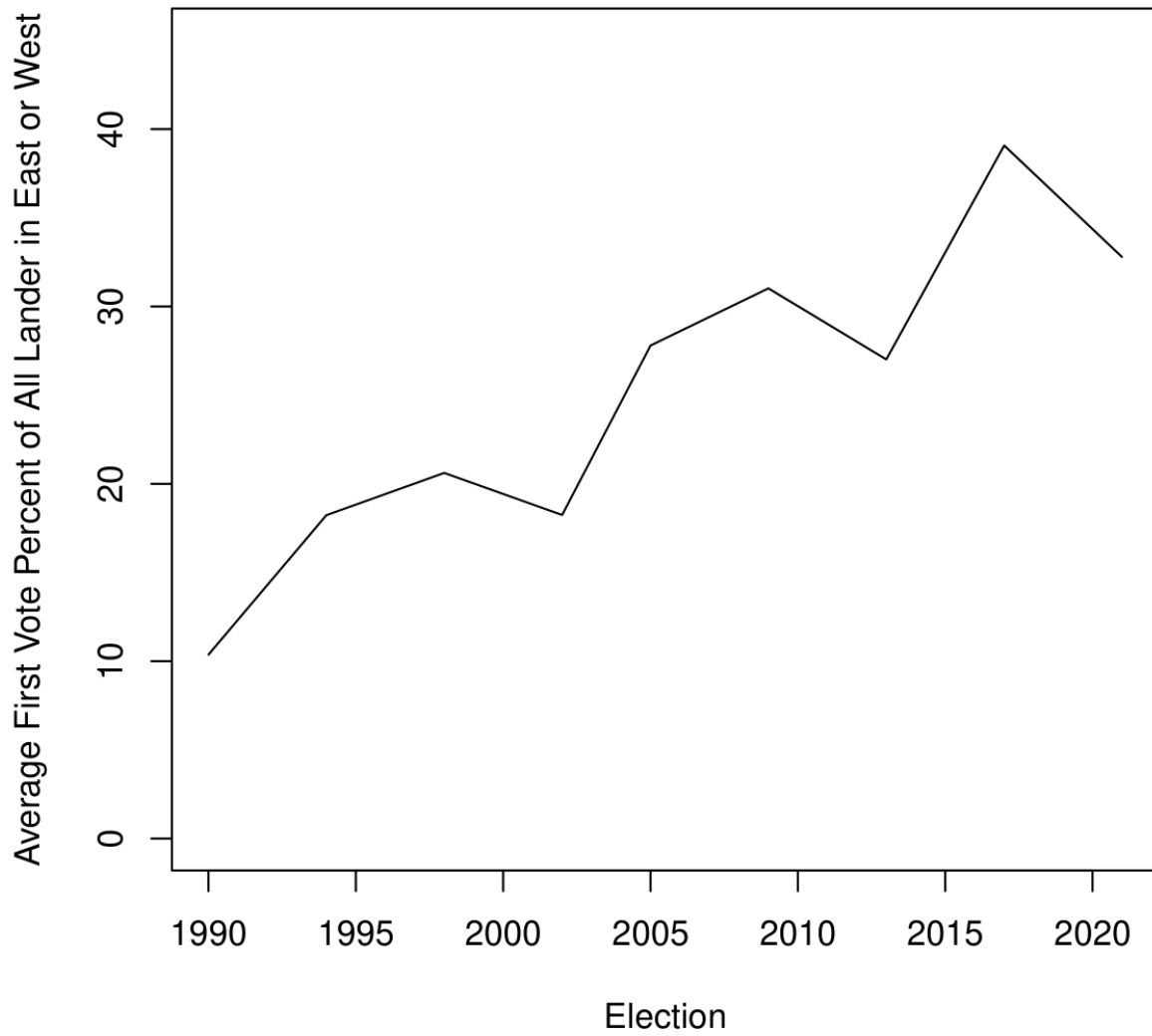# First Vote Percent of Extreme Parties over Time

Figure 7 (Combined Extremes Vote Percent in the East)

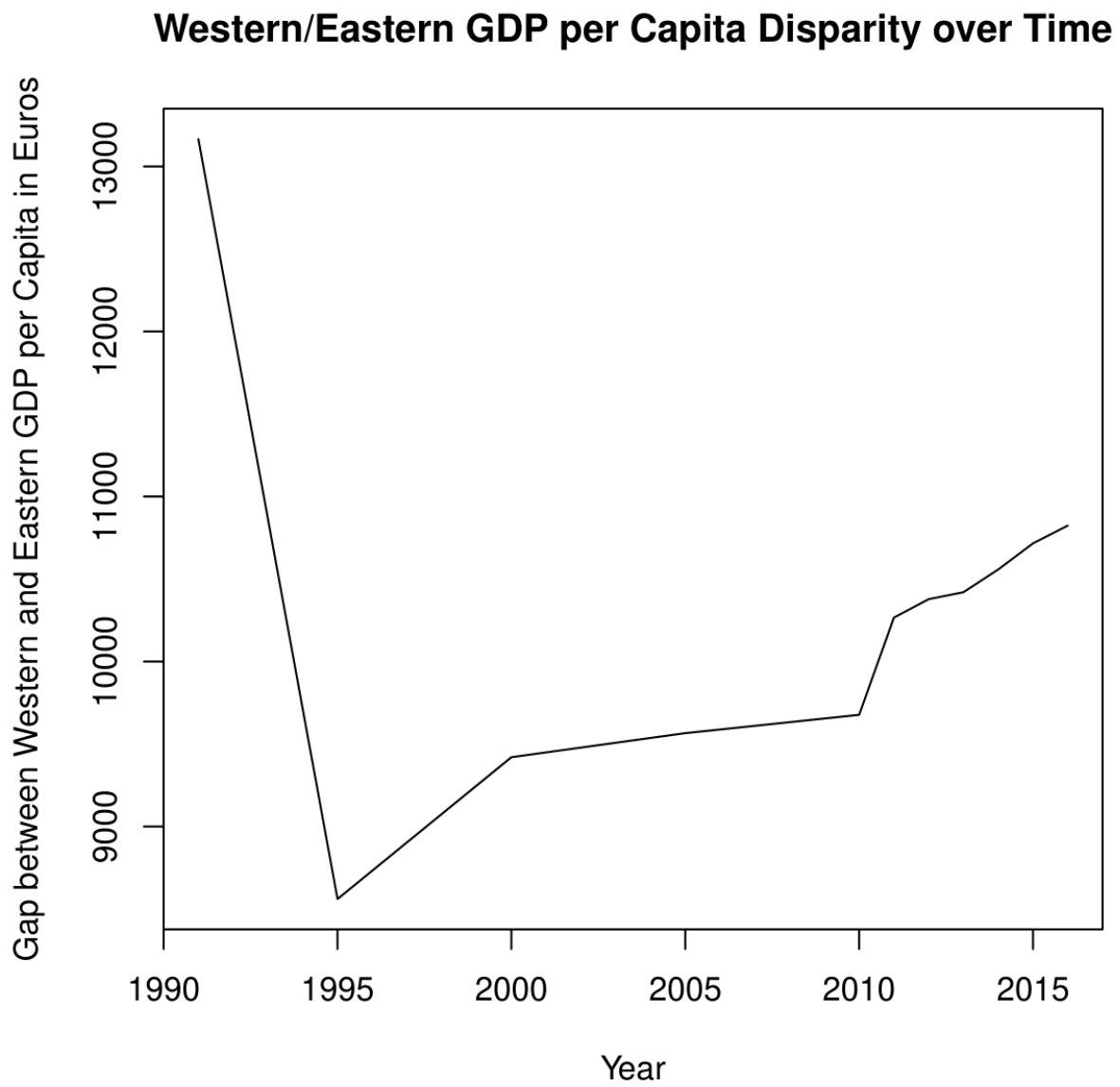# Western/Eastern GDP per Capita Disparity over Time

Figure 8 (Disparity of GDP per Capita Between West and East)

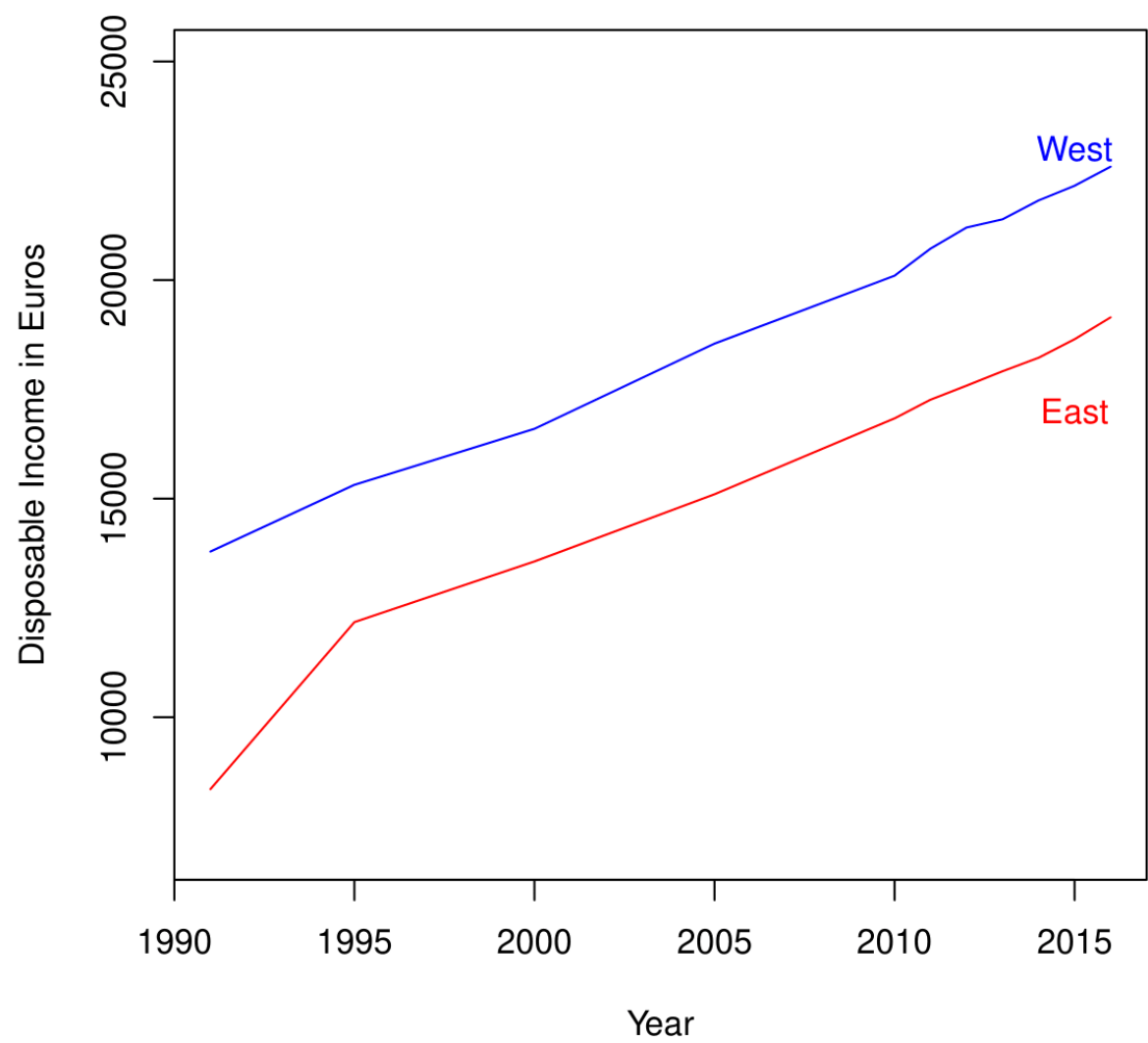# Disposable Income in Eastern and Western Germany

Figure 9 (Disposable Income in East and West)

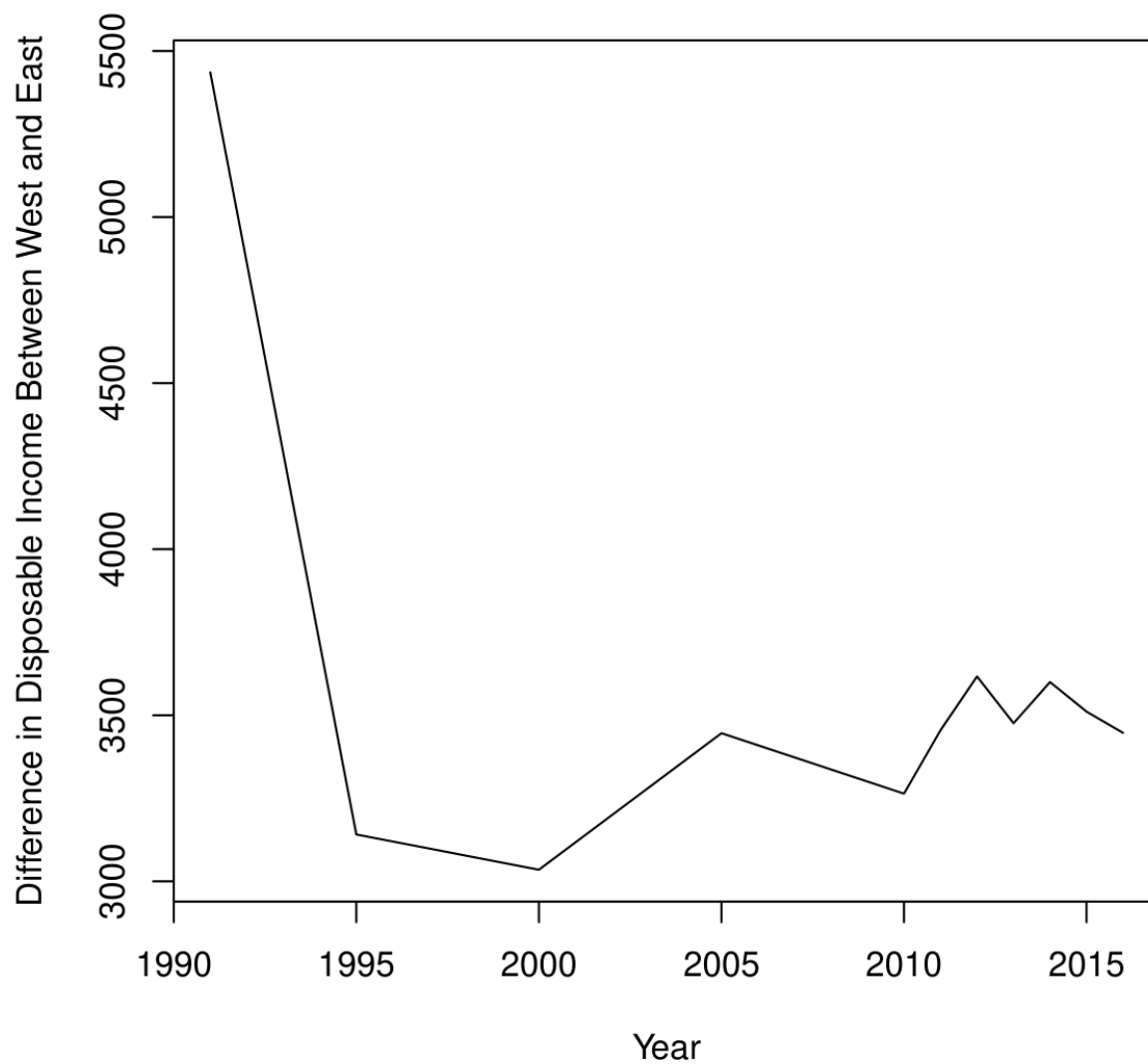# Disparity of Disposable Income Between West and East

Figure 10 (Disparity of Disposable Income Between West and East)
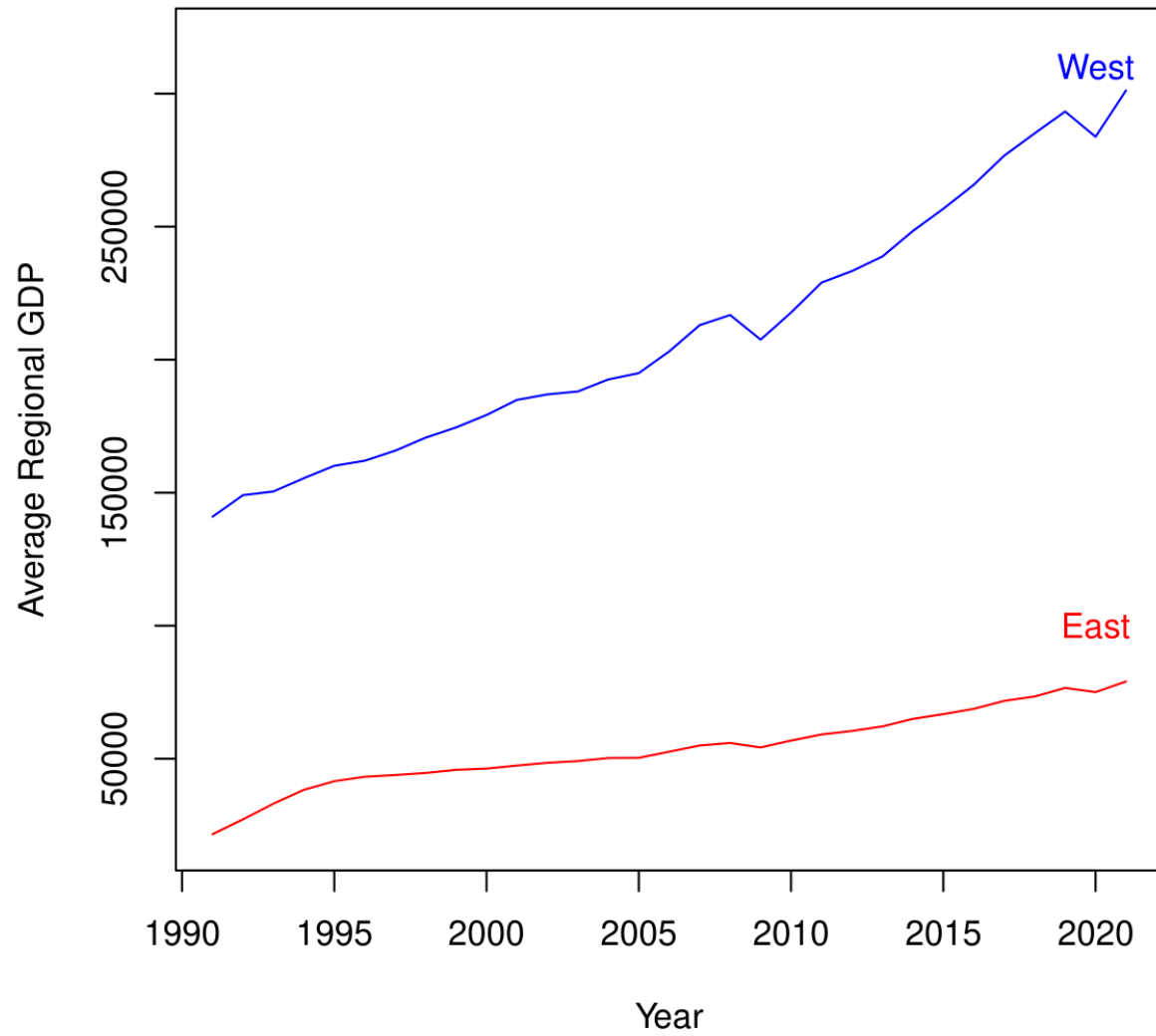
Average State GDP in the East and West by Year
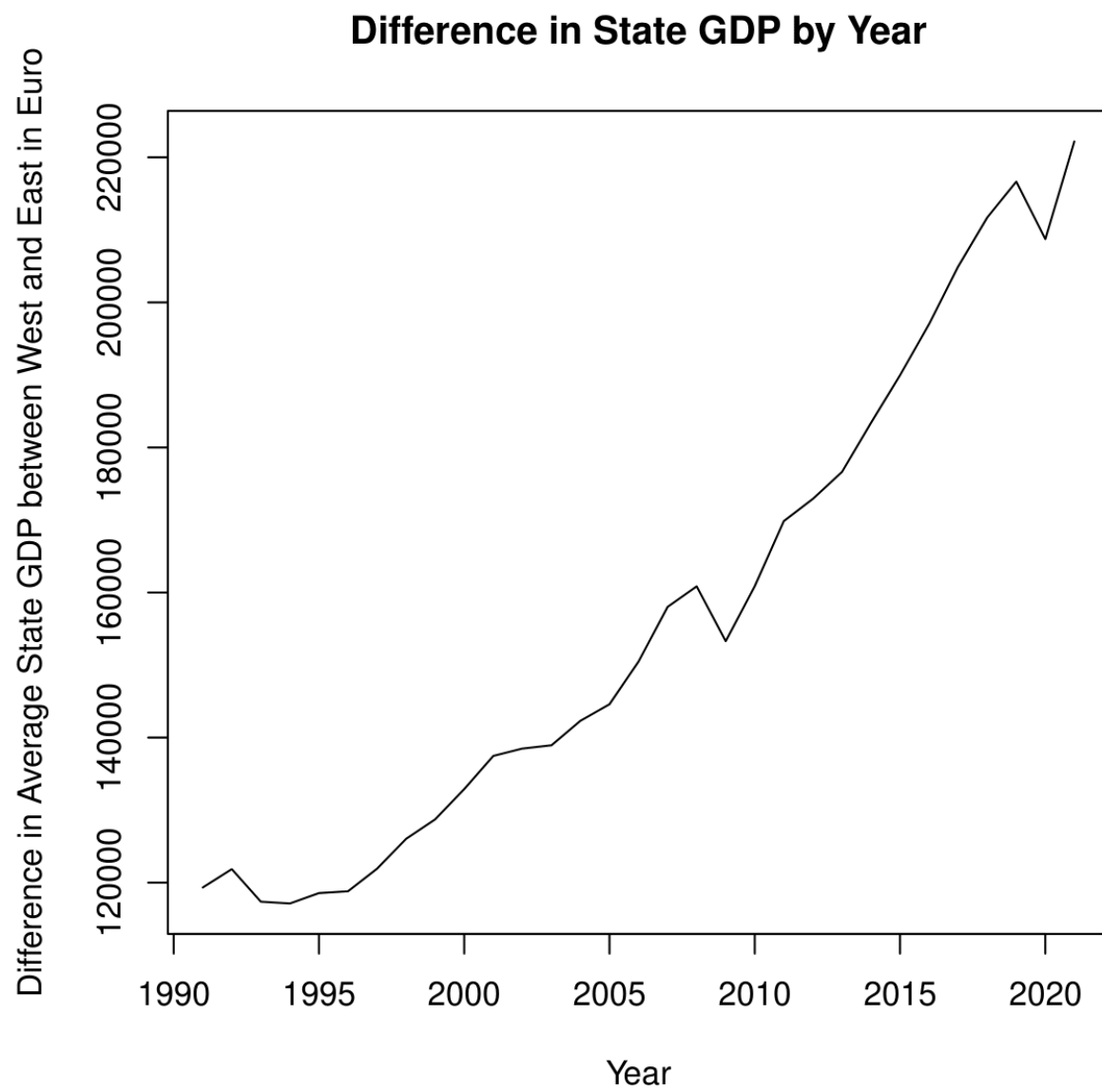

Figure 11 (Average State GDP in East and West)

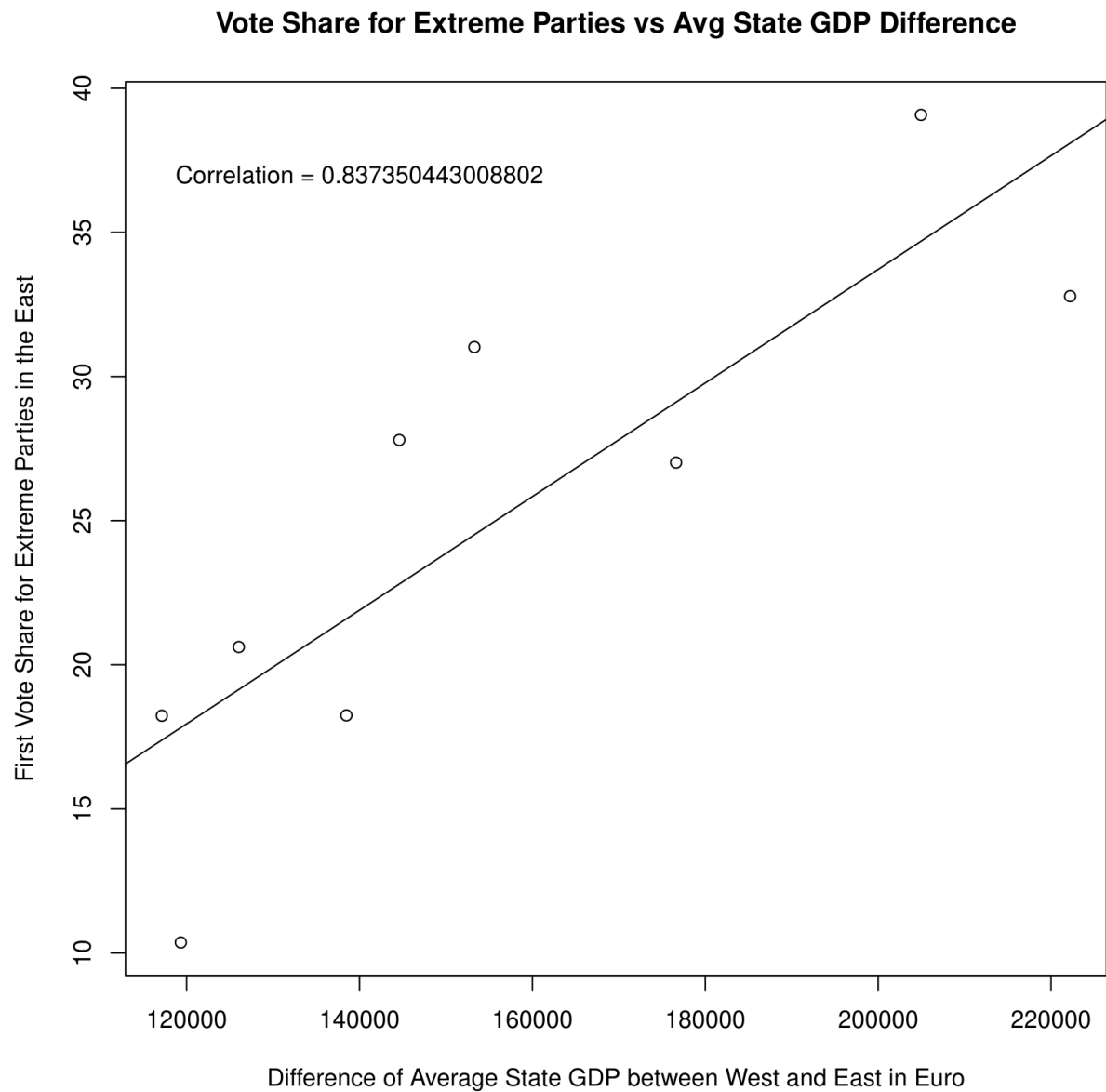Figure 12 (Difference in Average State GDP Between West and East)

Vote Share for Extreme Parties vs Avg State GDP Difference

Correlation = 0.837350443008802

First Vote Share for Extreme Parties in the East

Difference of Average State GDP between West and East in Euro

Figure 13 (Correlation of Average State GDP Difference and Performance of Extreme Parties in the East)

References

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