

Boundary Defense: Evidence from a Referendum Against School Reform

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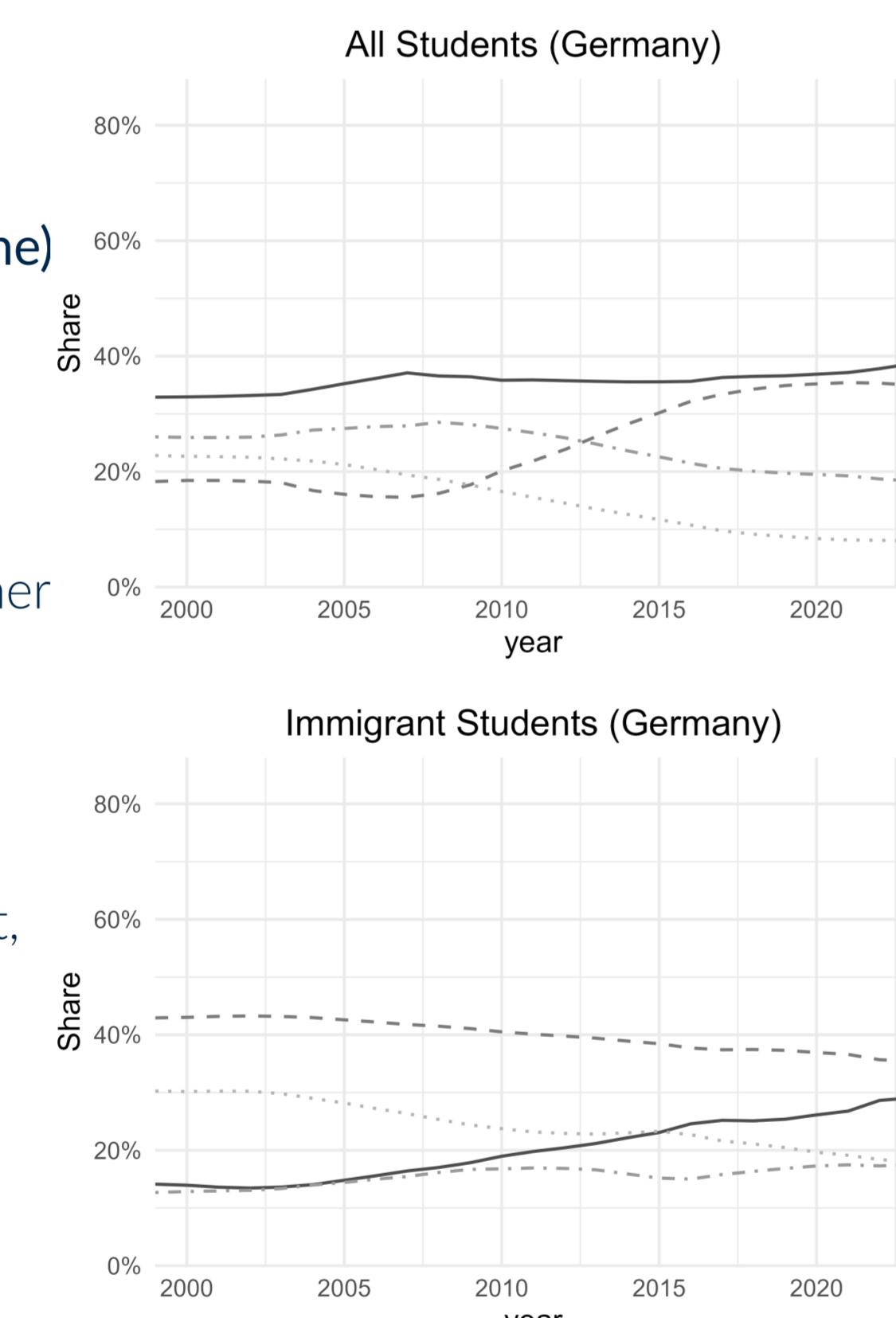
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Abstract

- Policies that reinforce unequal opportunity, *opportunity boundaries*, persist in democracies.
- Existing theories: Over-representation of elite voters/interests = economic inequalities
- Boundary Defense:** Middle-class families mobilize to defend *opportunity boundaries* against reform when they lack alternatives strategies to secure their uncertain status.
- Case: 2010 Referendum Against School Reform in Hamburg. Early-age sorting into stratified schools = *opportunity boundary*. Status-anxious German families mobilized to defend it.
- Data: precinct-level votes, city-district demographics, election studies, and media archives.
- Results: Referendum support was highest 1 in places where German families faced academic competition from immigrants 2 among less educated parents, and 3 predicts electoral backlash against reformers.
- Implications: Theory applies to *opportunity boundaries* in other cases. Policies that reduce middle-class uncertainty can help equalize opportunity given **Boundary Defense**.

Motivation: Early-Age Sorting Across Stratified Schools in Germany

- Around age 9, after grade 4, German children are sorted into schools by anticipated ability.
- Plurality of students attend academic Gymnasium, which offer access to universities (**top figure, solid line**)
- Far fewer immigrant children sort to these schools, which limits their access to universities. (**bottom figure, solid line**)
- This is partly attributable to tracking so young: less time for language integration; greater room for teacher bias = immigrant children sorted away from opportunities.
- This practice also has negative affects on average measured education outcomes in Germany, and constrains skill-development. It is socially inefficient, yet politically resilient.
- Early sorting across stratified schools in Germany promotes unequal opportunity between ethnic Germans and immigrants. I call policies like these *opportunity boundaries*



Why Do Specific Opportunity Boundaries Persist? Existing Theories

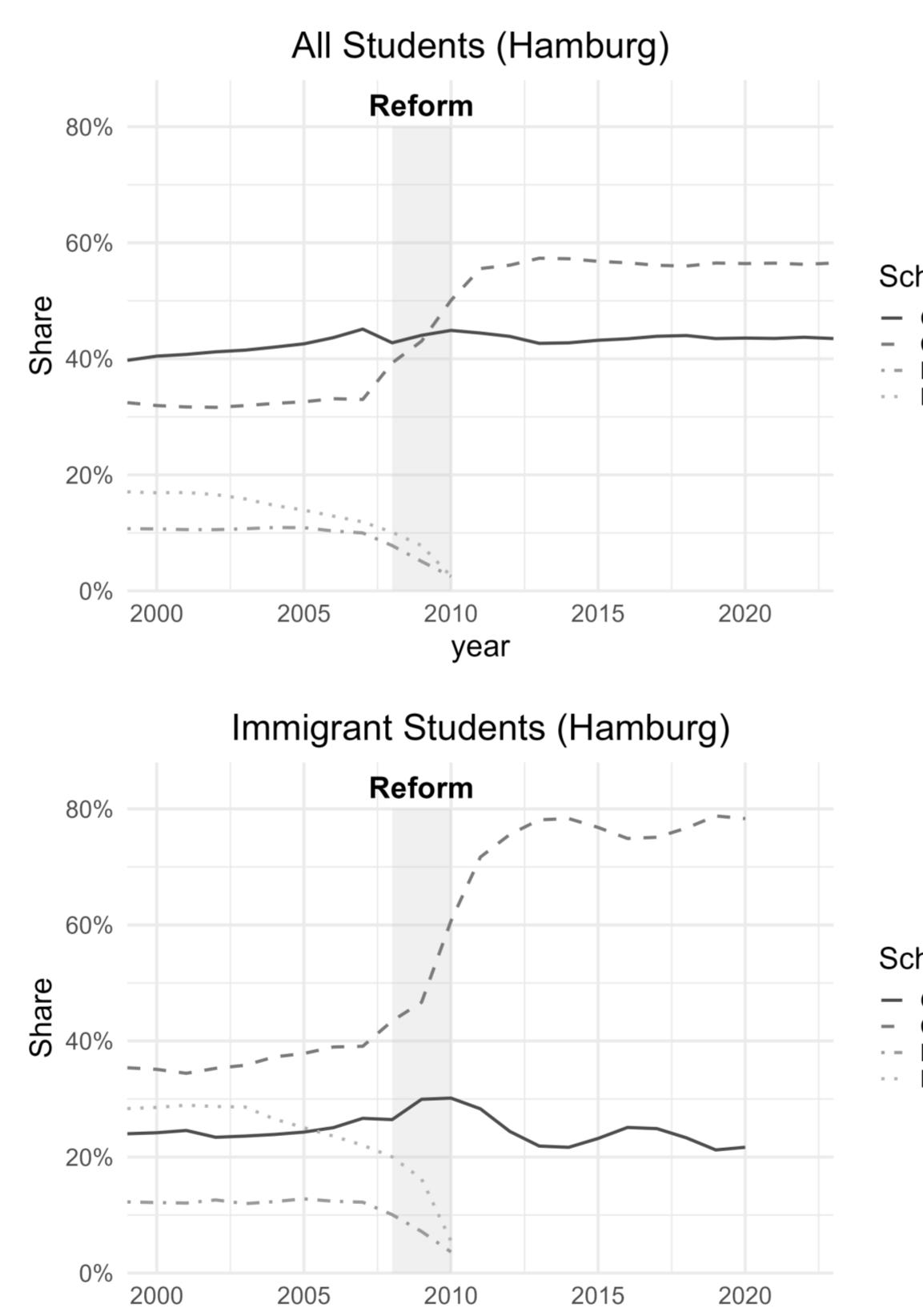
- Durable group-level inequalities characterize rich democracies. (Tilly, 1998)
- Opportunity boundaries** promote durable inequalities by distributing opportunities unequally.
- Political economists argue that democracy should constrain inequality through voters' demands for opportunity access (Iversen and Soskice, 2019), and that voters demand fair treatment (Kim and Hall 2024). What explains boundaries' resilience in democracies?
- Scholars have argued wealthy voters have outsized influence over policy due to representation gaps that favor the wealthy in the U.S. (Bartels, 2008, Gilens, 2012), and comparatively (Lupu and Pontusson, 2023). Others say upper-middle class "opportunity hoard" (Reeves, 2017).
- Problem:** For fiscal and redistributive policy, wealthy have clear interests to fight policy change. But they have less need for "opportunity hoarding", because they have strategic alternatives (Swenson, 2002). They can purchase "private alternatives" (Busemeyer and Iversen, 2019) in "opportunity markets" (Grusky et al, 2019).

A Theory of Boundary Defense

- Middle-class families defend opportunity boundaries against reform when they lack strategic alternatives to secure their uncertain status.
- Unlike *secure insiders* (**top left**) who have access to private alternatives, a group of middle-class *marginal insiders* (**bottom left**) face prospects of downward mobility without collective **Boundary Defense**.
- By contrast, *marginal outsiders* (**top right**) are those who would be upwardly mobile if reform succeeded.
- The political success of boundary defense depends on the size of the *marginal insider* group, and representation gaps between them and the *marginal outsider* group.

Pre-Reform High Status		Pre-Reform Low Status	
Post-Reform High Status	Secure Insiders (No Status Change)	Marginal Outsiders (Upwardly Mobile)	Marginal Insiders (Downwardly Mobile)
	Weakly Pro-Reform	Strongly Pro-Reform	
Post-Reform Low Status	Marginal Insiders (Downwardly Mobile)	Burdened Outsiders (No Status Change)	Ambiguous

Case: A 2010 Referendum Against School Reform in Hamburg



- In 2008, Christian Democrats and Greens in Hamburg pass reform that consolidate vocational schools into comprehensive school, delay tracking into these vs remaining academic Gymnasium by two years while eliminating parental choice over tracks.
- Citizen's movement, "We want to learn" proposes anti-reform referendum. Opposed delayed sorting and elimination of parental choice. But *did not* oppose consolidation of vocational schools, because reliance already low in Hamburg (**top panel**, low dashed lines vs all Germany to left).
- 2010 Referendum: 58%-42% to reverse reform. Early-age sorting restored, government collapses, Christian Democrats lose half of seats in 2011 snap election.
- Consequence:** Low immigrant enrollment in academic schools in Hamburg, never attained 2010 peak again (**bottom panel**).

Argument and Hypotheses

Argument: Lower middle-class in Hamburg mobilized to defend early sorting . It offers advantages for their children vs immigrants, which privileged families don't rely on.

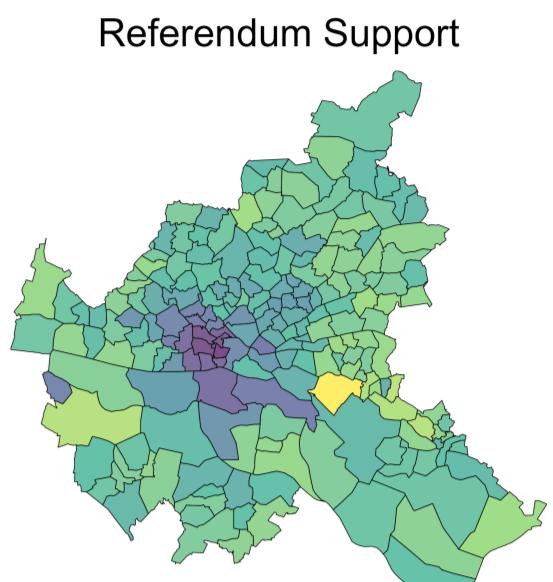
H1 Neighborhood-level referendum support higher with higher shares of immigrant children, lower academic school attendance shares, and in middle not high-income neighborhoods.

H2 Individual-level support for the referendum is expected to be higher among parents of school-age children who do not have academic school education.

H3 Electorally-motivated politicians are expected to accommodate the preferences of reform supporters after they become salient. Referendum support is expected to predict defection away from parties supporting reform to parties that oppose it.

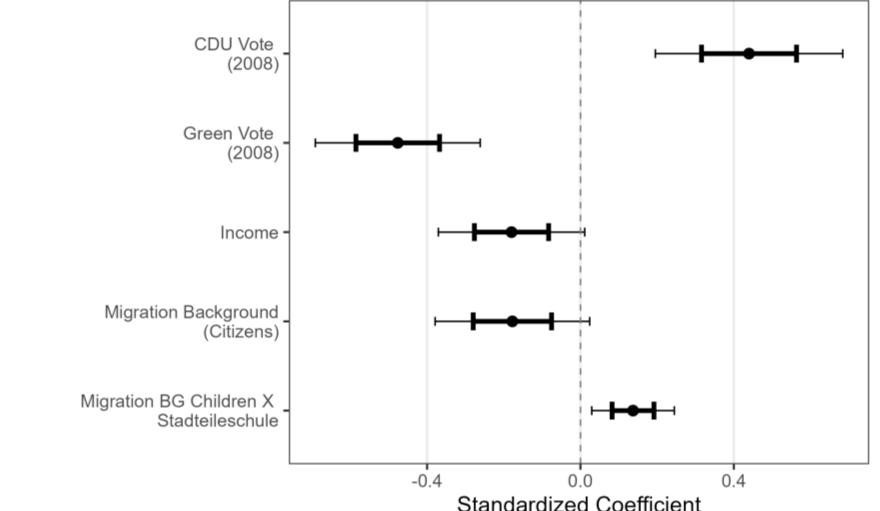
Data and Methodology

- Administrative Data: Precinct-level Votes, City-District Demographics:** Spatially match precinct boundaries (**right**) and city-district demographics to test **H1** on neighborhood level support, and **H3** on electoral punishment of reformers.
- Survey Data: Election Studies on Recalled Referendum Vote:** Election studies allow testing of micro-level predictors of referendum support, focusing on parents, which allows testing of **H2** on micro-level predictors and **H3** on electoral punishment of reformers.
- Archival Observations: News Media and Partisan Messaging:** News media for qualitative observation on who demanded reform, behavior of electorally motivated politicians to test **H3**.



Results

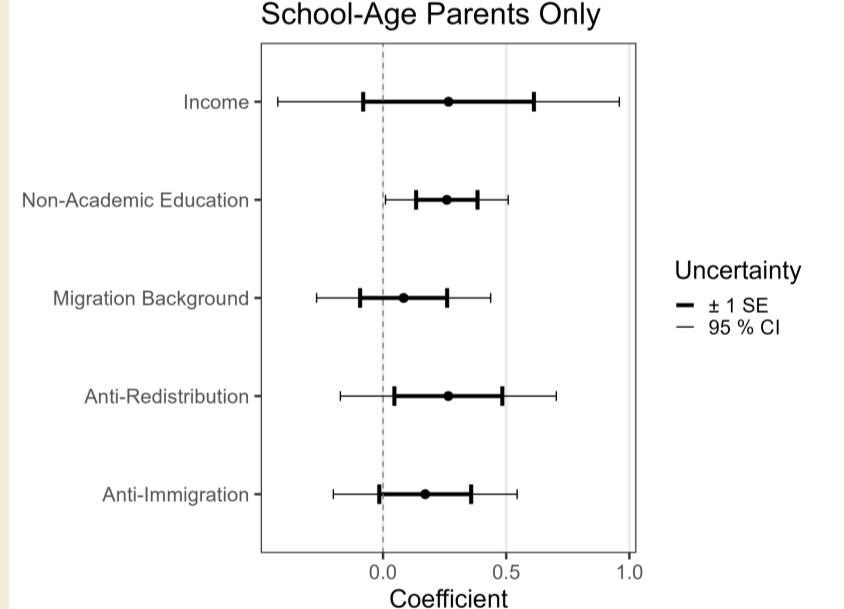
Polling-Place Level Votes and Stadtteile Characteristics



- Referendum support highest in non-wealthy areas, areas with higher share of immigrant children interacted with low share of Gymnasium attendance
- Interpretation:** places where German families faced academic competition from immigrants for scarce opportunity access, supporting **H1**

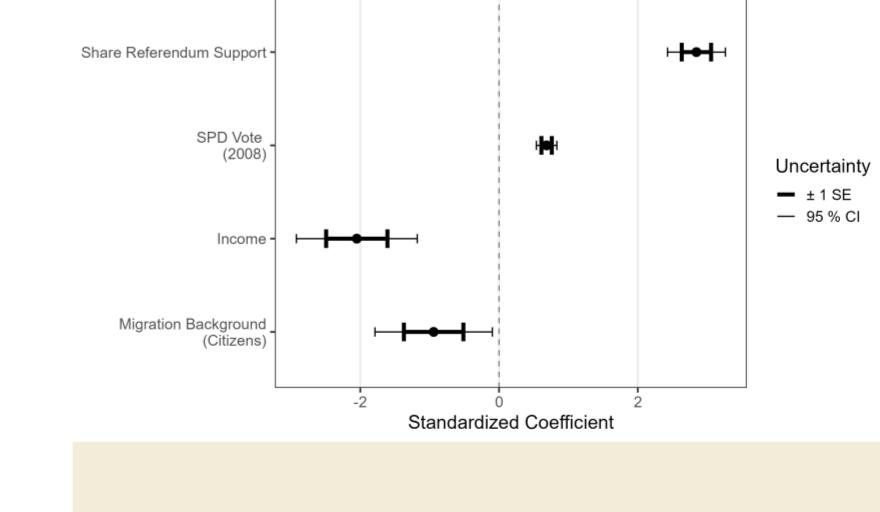
Micro-Level Predictors of Recalled Referendum Vote in Hamburg

- Less academically educated parents are most supportive of the referendum controlling for ideological beliefs on redistribution and immigration, other factors.
- Interpretation:** Parents who are less certain about their children's access with delayed tracking and no parental choice most supported referendum, supporting **H2**



Boundary Defense, Elite Constraint, and Electoral Consequences

- Social Democrats, reversed traditional positioning on school reform in response to citizen's movement. Ambitious Hamburg leader Olaf Scholz argued reform could cause uncertainty for lower middle-class, and attacked governing coalition with populist messaging, supporting **H3**.
- At precinct-level, referendum support predicts defection to Social Democrats, supporting **H3**.
- At micro-level, referendum support predicts defection to Social Democrats, supporting **H3**.



Broader Implications

- Theory applies to other policies, case contexts. Includes both other school assignment policies and policies that reinforce unequal opportunity in e.g. credit access, labor market policy.
- Equal opportunity consistent with democracy requires addressing middle-class voters' status anxieties amid economic change that raises uncertainty. Suggests solidaristic social policy may be a necessary complement to liberal labor markets if durable inequalities are to be redressed.