Economic insecurity, lack of representation and radical-right voting in the context of the 2021 German federal election

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1 Introduction

This essay examines whether, as some argue, the association between economic insecurity and radical-right support is moderated by voters' sense that the political system is incapable of addressing their economic grievances. To that end, I will, first, contextualise this research question in relation to the relevant literature, and, secondly, discuss the operationalisation of my dependent and independent variables. Thirdly, I will present my methodology and results, which do *not* support the argument that the political system's perceived lack of responsiveness moderates the relationship between economic insecurity and radical-right voting in the context of the 2021 German federal election.

2 Motivation and relation to literature

2023 marks the tenth year of the *Alternative für Deutschland*'s (AfD) existence. Originally founded by a coterie of eurosceptic professors, the AfD had, by late 2015, morphed into a classic radical-right party, when it started to adopt a strongly nativist, anti-immigrant platform (Arzheimer and Berning 2019; Cantoni, Hagemeister, and Westcott 2020). The AfD's entry into the *Bundestag* in 2017 was part of the wave of populist success that many (Western) European countries witnessed during the mid-2010s. This wave led to the debate about the determinants of radical-right support – which had been ongoing among political scientists at least since the late 1990s (e.g. Kitschelt and McGann 1995) – gaining greater attention in both other disciplines (Guriev and Papaioannou 2022) and public discourse.

While much of the debate on the demand-side of radical-right voting has focused on the relative importance of economic and cultural factors respectively (Colantone and Stanig 2019; Margalit 2019; Art 2022; Margalit, Raviv, and Solodoch 2022), the theoretical framework I test below belongs to another, somewhat more nascent strand of the literature. This strand argues, inter alia, that the effect of economic grievances is moderated by (i) voters' trust in political institutions, notably parties and parliaments, and (ii) the degree to which they feel their preferences are represented in the party system (e.g. Dustmann et al. 2017; Eichengreen 2018; Ivanov 2023).

Though often not explicitly acknowledged by non-political-scientists, this set of theoretical hypotheses echoes not only the work by Katz and Mair (2009) on the cartelisation of Western European party systems, but also more recent work stressing the importance of representational deficits in driving populist support (e.g. Manow 2020; Schäfer and Zürn 2021; Silva and Wratil 2023). More importantly, these hypotheses have been subjected

to relatively little empirical testing, as Sonin (2022) notes in his review of the work by Eichengreen (2018). This essay is intended as a small step towards filling this gap in the literature.

3 Theory and case selection

Like many economic-insecurity-centred accounts of radical-right support, the theoretical argument starts from the observation that economic shocks - such as automation (Boix 2019) and trade liberalisation (Autor, Dorn, and Hanson 2013) - create winners and losers. This assumption holds true not only for most Western European countries (Colantone and Stanig 2018a; Milner 2021), in general, but also for Germany, in particular (Dauth, Findeisen, and Südekum 2014; Dauth et al. 2021). Those losers, the argument goes on, who do not believe the current political system can address their grievances will then turn to populist radical-right parties.

By way of unpacking this argument, note, first, that losers may believe the political system to be incapable of redressing their economic grievances for two distinct reasons. First, they might deem all mainstream parties to be much of a muchness, meaning none of the supposedly different parties is seen by losers as representing their preferences. In that instance, losers are likely to think that it does not matter which mainstream party they vote for, or which of those parties governs. Second, even if voters believe at least one mainstream party to endorse policies conducive to redressing their economic grievances, they might not trust any mainstream politician to follow through on these promises.[1]

These two reasons also show why the theory predicts economic losers, as a result of their grievances, to turn to radical-right parties, rather than left-wing parties. Many other economic-insecurity-type arguments are unable to resolve this puzzle, which arises because the latter's platforms tend to be significantly more pro-redistributive than the former's platforms. Using the terminology introduced by Linz (1978), the reason is that losers regard left-wing parties as loyal to the political system and in cahoots with the other mainstream actors. Their redistributive promises therefore lack credibility. By contrast, radical-right parties' semi-loyalty or outright disloyalty to the system means that voting for them increases the likelihood that the political system, characterised by the mainstream cartel (Katz and Mair 2009), will be disrupted.

In sum, this theoretical argument implies (at least)[2] four testable hypotheses.

- H1: Economic insecurity, *ceteris paribus*, increases the probability of voting for the radical right.
- H2: The effect of economic insecurity on the probability of voting for the radical right is, *ceteris paribus*, stronger for those who believe their preferences not be represented in the current party system.
- H3: The effect of economic insecurity is, *ceteris paribus*, stronger for those who are more distrustful of parties and/or parliament.
- H4: Economic insecurity, *ceteris paribus*, increases the probability of voting for the radical right, relative to pro-redistributive left-wing parties, notably the SPD and LINKE.

Before setting out my empirical strategy, let me briefly discuss my two reasons for choosing the case of the 2021 German federal election. First, the 2021 election occurred in the wake of the third wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, which caused widespread financial insecurity among German households (Cziriak 2022). Secondly, the pandemic was a politically contentious period, causing deep divides over the desirability and efficacy of both

[1] This 'trust' channel is distinct from a 'valence' channel, where voters fundamentally trust politicians, but judge their levels of competence to differ (Green and Jennings 2017).

[2] The argument could also be taken to imply that (i) a perceived lack of representation and (ii) low trust increase the probability of voting for the radical right. Given the space constraints, I prescind from testing these two hypotheses.

non-pharmaceutical interventions, such as mask mandates, and vaccination. The *Querdenker* movement, in particular, used their protests to stress that their interests were not represented by any mainstream party (e.g. Plümper, Neumayer, and Pfaff 2021). Both factors mean that economic insecurity and subjectively perceived representational deficits were likely salient in the minds of some voters, making this election a suitable case for testing the above hypotheses.

4 Data, variables and operationalisation

To test the above hypotheses, I use the *German Longitudinal Election Study's* (GLES) 2021 post-election survey - a high-quality survey of a cross-section of 3424 (quasi-)randomly selected individuals, containing a rich set of questions about respondents' social and political attitudes as well as their socio-demographic characteristics. The survey was conducted shortly after the federal election.[3] We therefore get to observe respondents' (self-reported) voting behaviour, rather than merely their voting intention, while reducing the risk of recall problems biasing our results. That said, this survey, like most others, faces the limitation that we cannot rule out that respondents' actual voting behaviour diverges from their self-reported one.

Table 1: Summary of variables and their operationalisation

Variable	Operationalisation	Survey item(s)
dependent variable		
Radical-right voting	factor indicating party vote choice	q114ba
	dummy for AfD Zweitstimme	q114ba = 322
independent variables		
Economic insecurity	dummy for unemployment in past ten years	d17a-c
	fear of job loss	d18
	fear of losing or having to change profession	d19
	personal economic situation currently	q13
Political system not responsive	no difference which party governs	q117
	no difference which party one votes for	q118
Trust in political system	trust in parliament	q79b
	trust in parties	q79c

* Unemployment experience is, following Dauth et al (2021), defined as an individual having been unemployed for at least one year.
* Source: Codebook for GLES Cross-Section 2021, Post-Election, ZA7701, Dataset Version v1.0.0.

My dependent variable is radical-right voting, which, in the German context, means casting one's party vote (*Zweitstimme*) for the AfD. As indicated in table 1, I operationalise the dependent variable in two ways. I use a dummy variable to test hypotheses H1 to H3, while I rely on the full factor variable to test H4. This is because the first three hypotheses concern the probability of voting for the radical right, relative to all other parties, whereas the fourth hypothesis concerns the probability of voting for the AfD, relative to the pro-redistributive, left-wing parties, the SPD and LINKE.

My independent variables of interest are economic insecurity, respondents' perception of the political system's responsiveness, and their trust in the system. To operationalise economic insecurity, I use a dummy for

[3] The federal election was held on 26 September 2021, while the survey was conducted between 27 September 2021 and 21 November 2021.

actual unemployment experience in the past ten years. Given that the labour market literature shows past unemployment to be strongly predictive of present unemployment risk (e.g. Autor, Dube, and McGrew 2023), this dummy can be interpreted as an objective measure of economic insecurity. To capture subjectively perceived insecurity, I rely on respondents' fear of losing their jobs in the next two years. The other two economic insecurity variables (see table 1) are merely used to probe the robustness of my findings (see appendix). Finally, following (Colantone and Stanig 2018b), I use respondents' answers to the questions 'Does it make a difference who is governing/who one votes for?' and 'How much do you trust parliament/political parties?' as measures for the perceived responsiveness of Germany's political system and voters' trust in the latter respectively.

5 Methodology[4] and results

I estimate logistic regressions to test the first three hypotheses since my dependent variable is a dummy for AfD party vote. I regress the latter on my two measures for economic insecurity as well as the measures for representation and trust, and the interactions between them and economic insecurity. In addition, I include a vector of covariates to control for potential observable confounders. The vector includes respondents' household income, their age, education, the rurality of their place of residence and a dummy indicating whether they currently live in East or West German states.

Save for the East-West dummy and, possibly, the rurality variable, these are standard covariates in the literature, with, for instance, Colantone and Stanig (2019) explaining why these might confound the relationship between economic insecurity and radical-right voting. The inclusion of the rurality variable is motivated by the work of Haffert (2022), who shows that geographic location has become an important determinant of voting behaviour in Germany in recent years. The East-West dummy accounts for the economic, cultural, and political differences between these two parts of Germany (e.g. Becker, Mergele, and Wößmann 2020). Letting $\mathbf{X}$ denote the vector of covariates and ϵ the error term, we can write the estimating equation[5] for the logistic regression with the political system's responsiveness as the moderating variable as follows:

$$log(\frac{AfD_i}{1-AfD_i}) = \alpha + \beta_1 Insecurity_i + \beta_2 Representation_i + \beta_3 Insecurity_i * Representation_i + \beta_4 \mathbf{X}_i + \epsilon_i$$

Figure 1 visualises[6] the results from estimating these specifications. H1, H2 and H3 imply that $\beta_1 > 0$ and $\beta_3 > 0$. Using the unemployment experience and fear of job loss variables as proxies for economic insecurity, figure 1 shows that, contrary to expectations, economic insecurity does *not* significantly increase the probability of voting for the AfD. The coefficient estimates on the interaction terms are, except for one, statistically insignificant, suggesting it is *not* the case that the marginal effect of insecurity varies by the political system's responsiveness or respondents' trust in parliament. This conclusion is reinforced by figures 2 and 3 in the appendix. Finally, this null finding is largely,[7] as tables 5 and 6 in the appendix bear out, robust to relying on the two other proxies for economic insecurity mentioned in table 1.

Testing H4 requires us to modify our estimation technique to account for the dependent variable being a

[4] The replication code can be found here.
[5] The specification for trust is entirely analogous.
[6] See tables 2 and 3 in the appendix for the full regression tables, including coefficient estimates for the covariates.
[7] Two of the interaction terms in table 7 are statistically significant.

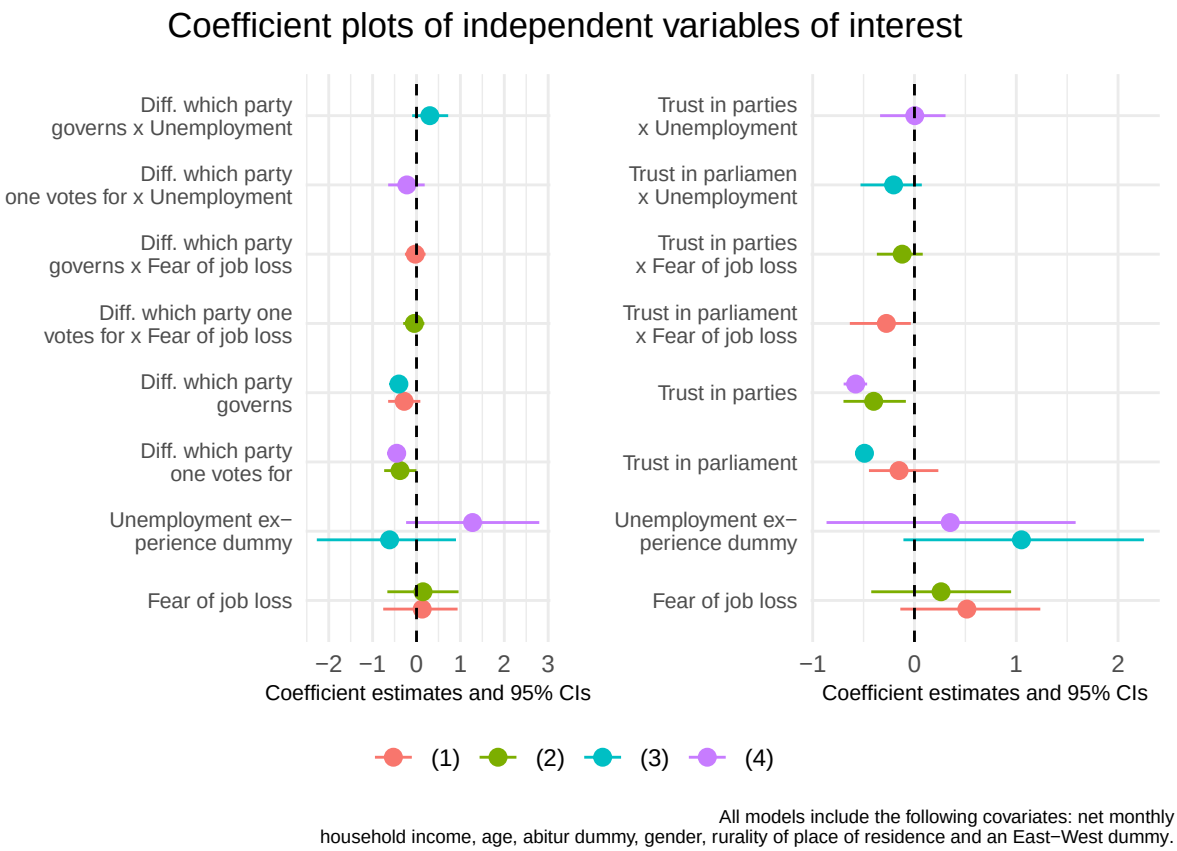

Figure 1: Summary of tests for H1 - H3

multi-category factor, rather than a dichotomous variable. To that end, I estimate a multinomial model, using the same vector of covariates as above. Respondents' fear of losing their jobs serves as my proxy for economic insecurity and their answers to the question 'Does it make a difference who is governing?' as my measure for the political system's responsiveness. I also drop the interaction term since H4 is *not* about differences in marginal effects, i.e.:

$$RelativeProbability_{ij} = \alpha + \beta_1 Insecurity_i + \beta_2 Representation_i + \beta_3 \mathbf{X}_i + \epsilon_i$$

The dependent variable indicates the probability that respondent i votes for party j, rather than voting for the AfD. As explained above, H4 implies that β_1 should be negative for the SPD and LINKE.

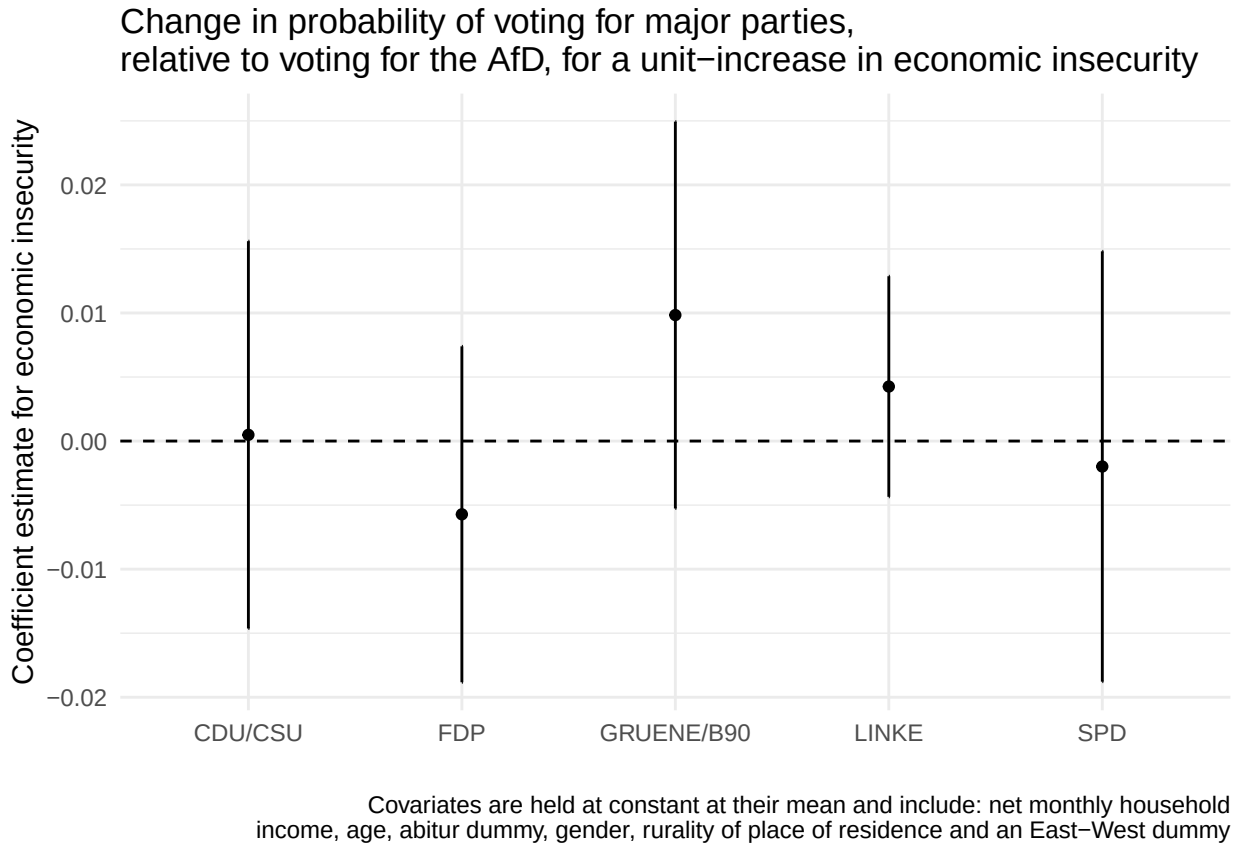

Figure 2: Coefficient estimate of economic insecurity from multinomial model

Figure 2 shows the coefficient estimates[8] for β_1 - none of which are statistically significant at conventional levels.[9] This entails that a unit-increase in economic insecurity does not significantly reduce the relative probability of voting for pro-redistributive, left-wing parties, here the SPD and Linke. Hence, we find no support for H4.

Before concluding, it is worth dwelling on two limitations of the above analysis. First, the regression results should not be interpreted causally. While I control for a set of observable confounders, I cannot rule out

[8] See table 4 in appendix for the full regression table.
[9] Conventional levels being the 1%, 5% and 10% levels.

that other variables, particularly unobservable ones, confound the relationship between economic insecurity and radical-right voting. Second, my measures for the key independent variables (see table 1), particularly economic insecurity, are noisy, which can complicate statistical inference by inflating standard errors and, thus, increasing the risk of type II errors or null results.

6 Conclusion

In summary, I examined whether the German political system's perceived responsiveness and voter's trust in the latter moderate the relationship between economic insecurity and AfD support. By estimating a series of logistic and multinomial regressions models, I found this *not* to be the case in the 2021 German federal election. While this null finding is robust to different operationalisations of the key independent variables, the analysis is subject to considerable limitations, implying that the results should be interpreted as tentative, rather than definitive, evidence against the hypotheses tested here.

Word count: 2098

7 References

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8 Appendix

8.1 Marginal effect plots and regression tables

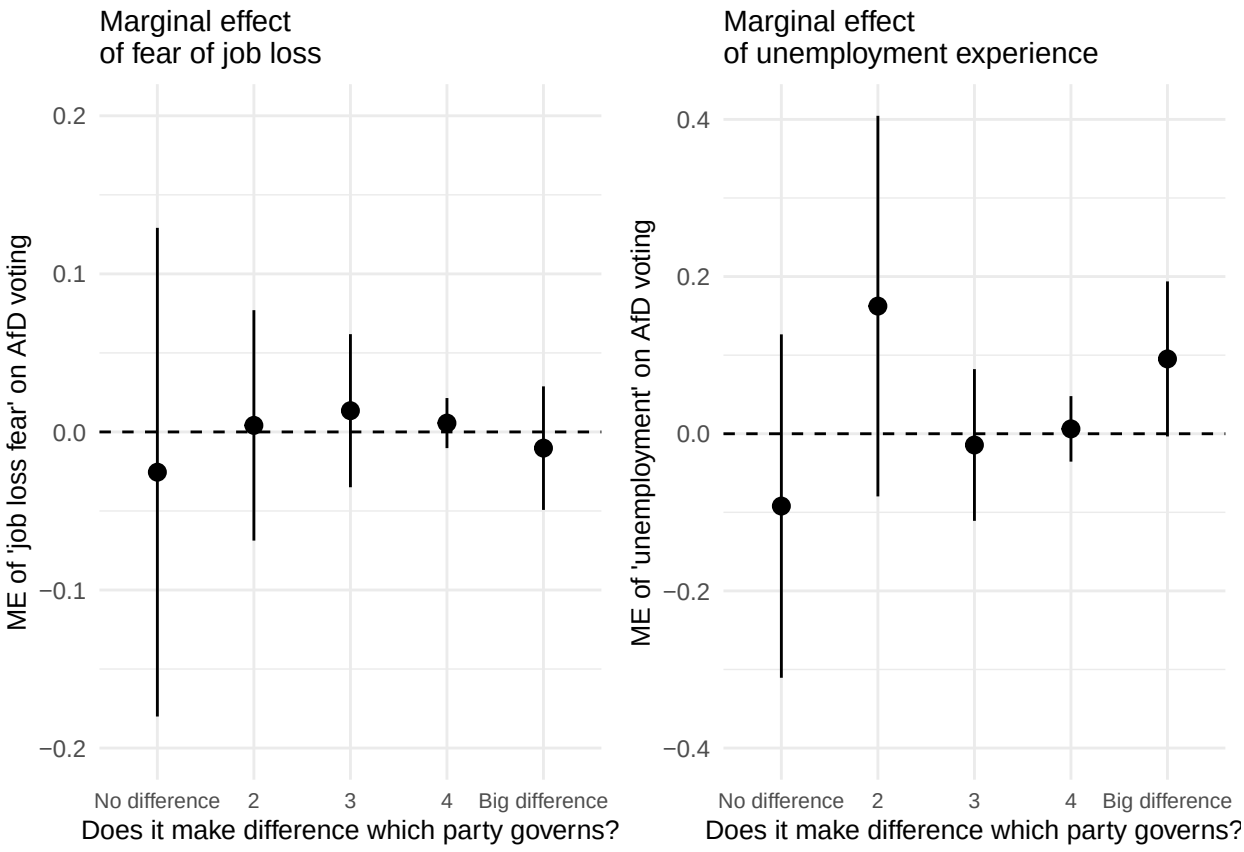

Figure 3: Marginal effects of economic insecurity by perceived responsiveness

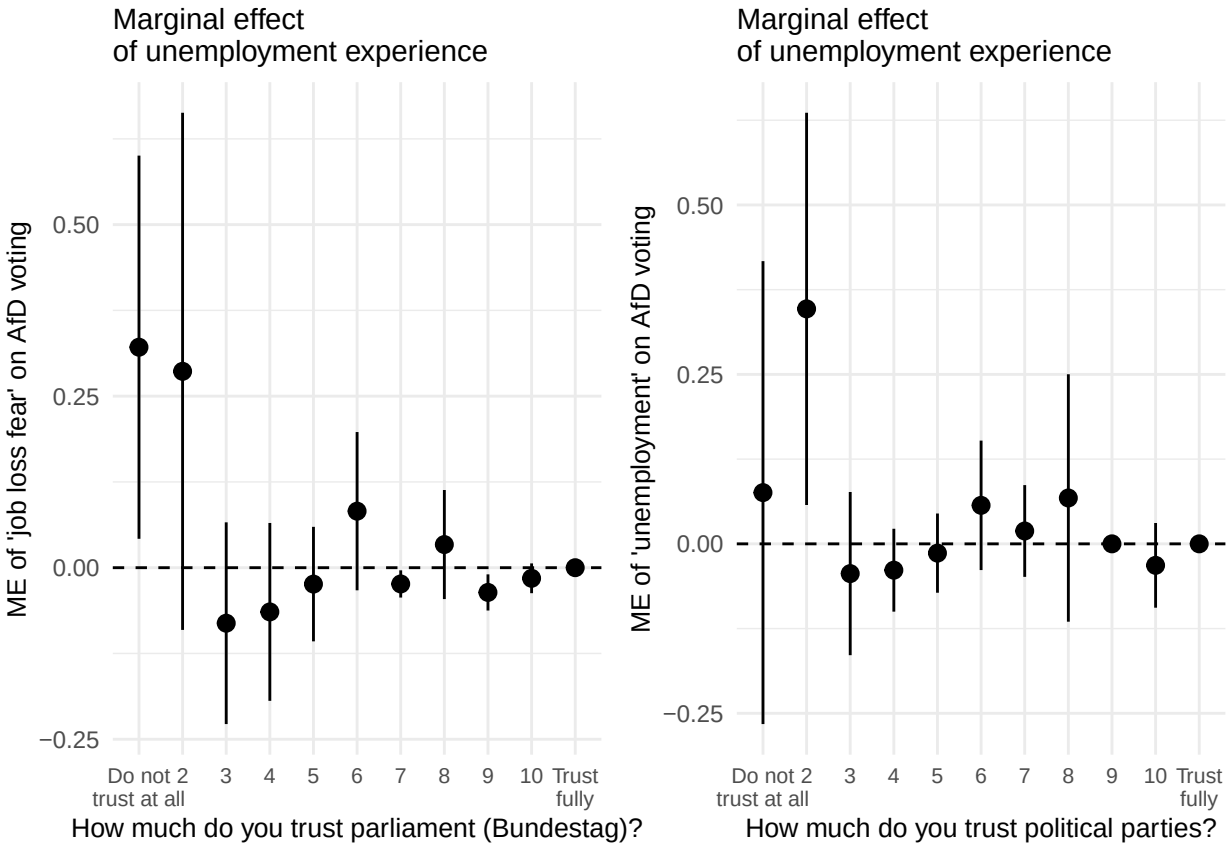

Figure 4: Marginal effects of economic insecurity by trust

Table 2: Association between the probability of voting for the AfD and economic insecurity

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Fear of job loss	0.130	0.147		
	(0.425)	(0.407)		
Unemployment experience dummy			−0.613	1.277+
			(0.801)	(0.767)
Difference which party one votes for		−0.375*		−0.451***
		(0.187)		(0.077)
Difference which party governs	−0.281		−0.402***	
	(0.186)		(0.077)	
Difference which party one votes for x Fear of job loss		−0.050		
		(0.121)		
Difference which party governs x Fear of job loss	−0.028			
	(0.118)			
Difference which party one votes for x Unemployment				−0.219
				(0.211)
Difference which party governs x Unemployment			0.304	
			(0.207)	
Age	−0.009	−0.010	−0.008	−0.009
	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.005)	(0.006)
Female dummy	−0.778**	−0.781**	−0.676***	−0.708***
	(0.252)	(0.255)	(0.183)	(0.187)
Household income	−0.123*	−0.106+	−0.097*	−0.081*
	(0.060)	(0.061)	(0.039)	(0.040)
Rurality of place of residence	0.241*	0.243*	0.092	0.109
	(0.117)	(0.118)	(0.082)	(0.084)
No Abitur dummy	1.013***	0.982**	0.818***	0.773***
	(0.299)	(0.303)	(0.221)	(0.223)
West Germany dummy	−1.385***	−1.336***	−1.047***	−1.017***
	(0.245)	(0.248)	(0.178)	(0.182)
Num.Obs.	1276	1265	2324	2296
AIC	548.7	537.0	1013.5	984.9
BIC	600.2	588.4	1071.1	1042.3
Log.Lik.	−264.344	−258.483	−496.774	−482.439
RMSE	0.24	0.24	0.24	0.24

Table 3: Association between the probability of voting for the AfD and economic insecurity

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Fear of job loss	0.515	0.261		
	(0.347)	(0.348)		
Unemployment experience dummy			1.051+	0.352
			(0.599)	(0.621)
Trust in parliament	−0.151		−0.491***	
	(0.170)		(0.045)	
Trust in parties		−0.401**		−0.578***
		(0.155)		(0.059)
Trust in parliament x Fear of job loss	−0.276+			
	(0.150)			
Trust in parties x Fear of job loss		−0.121		
		(0.114)		
Trust in parliament x Unemployment			−0.205	
			(0.152)	
Trust in parties x Unemployment				0.003
				(0.163)
Age	−0.002	−0.005	0.003	−0.004
	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.006)	(0.006)
Female dummy	−0.911***	−0.934***	−0.834***	−0.830***
	(0.271)	(0.272)	(0.202)	(0.199)
Household income	−0.071	−0.107+	−0.048	−0.080+
	(0.066)	(0.064)	(0.044)	(0.042)
Rurality of place of residence	0.214+	0.203+	0.111	0.091
	(0.126)	(0.121)	(0.090)	(0.087)
No Abitur dummy	0.902**	1.037***	0.652**	0.793***
	(0.315)	(0.309)	(0.233)	(0.230)
West Germany dummy	−1.237***	−1.292***	−1.034***	−1.054***
	(0.259)	(0.256)	(0.191)	(0.188)
Num.Obs.	1247	1242	2272	2263
AIC	466.1	477.6	837.4	865.3
BIC	517.4	528.8	894.6	922.6
Log.Lik.	−223.064	−228.793	−408.682	−422.655
RMSE	0.23	0.22	0.22	0.23

Table 4: Multinomial analysis

	Multinomial model with AfD as reference category					
	CDU/CSU	SPD	FDP	GRUENE/B90	LINKE	Other party
Intercept	−4.157***	−1.740+	−0.805	−2.348*	0.976	1.210
	(1.108)	(1.025)	(1.119)	(1.072)	(1.193)	(1.296)
Fear of job loss	−0.024	−0.033	−0.076	0.019	0.034	−0.207
	(0.176)	(0.166)	(0.187)	(0.172)	(0.195)	(0.244)
Difference which party governs	0.519***	0.289**	0.303*	0.552***	0.156	−0.122
	(0.120)	(0.111)	(0.125)	(0.122)	(0.136)	(0.142)
Age	0.020+	0.032**	−0.017	0.008	0.002	−0.041**
	(0.012)	(0.011)	(0.012)	(0.011)	(0.013)	(0.015)
Female dummy	0.779**	0.916***	0.389	1.173***	0.445	0.560
	(0.280)	(0.269)	(0.297)	(0.279)	(0.326)	(0.348)
Household income	0.210**	0.085	0.175*	0.157*	−0.017	0.141
	(0.070)	(0.065)	(0.073)	(0.068)	(0.077)	(0.088)
Rurality of place of residence	−0.066	−0.268*	−0.206	−0.365**	−0.381*	−0.223
	(0.130)	(0.124)	(0.135)	(0.128)	(0.149)	(0.160)
No Abitur dummy	−0.585+	−0.877**	−0.914**	−1.728***	−1.276***	−0.382
	(0.329)	(0.317)	(0.338)	(0.324)	(0.368)	(0.398)
West Germany dummy	1.349***	1.556***	1.232***	1.967***	0.489	0.933**
	(0.281)	(0.268)	(0.296)	(0.288)	(0.320)	(0.351)
Num.Obs.	1276					gof
R2	0.589					gof
R2 Adj.	0.588					gof
AIC	4303.1					gof
BIC	4581.3					gof
RMSE	0.33					gof

8.2 Robustness checks

Table 5: Robustness check I

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Fear of losing/changing profession	−0.470	−1.766		
	(0.979)	(1.661)		
Current economic situation (subjective)			0.435	0.332
			(0.293)	(0.285)
Diff. which party one votes for		−1.939*		−0.660**
		(0.786)		(0.216)
Diff. which party governs	−1.173+		−0.460*	
	(0.602)		(0.217)	
Diff. which party one votes for x Fear of losing/changing profession		0.539		
		(0.411)		
Diff. which party governs x Fear of losing/changing profession	0.187			
	(0.275)			
Diff. which party one votes for x Current econ. situation				0.079
				(0.075)
Diff. which party governs x Current econ. situation			0.052	
			(0.077)	
Age	−0.007	−0.028	−0.005	−0.007
	(0.035)	(0.037)	(0.005)	(0.006)
Female dummy	−2.188+	−2.521+	−0.751***	−0.788***
	(1.286)	(1.368)	(0.181)	(0.184)
Household income	−0.034	0.065	−0.034	−0.024
	(0.172)	(0.185)	(0.040)	(0.041)
Rurality of place of residence	−0.118	−0.053	0.099	0.102
	(0.313)	(0.315)	(0.081)	(0.082)
No Abitur dummy	0.549	0.986	0.723**	0.698**
	(0.894)	(0.930)	(0.220)	(0.222)
West Germany dummy	−1.639*	−2.085*	−1.078***	−1.037***
	(0.825)	(0.890)	(0.175)	(0.178)
Num.Obs.	159	156	2417	2388
AIC	73.7	69.5	1032.4	1000.2
BIC	104.3	100.0	1090.3	1058.0
Log.Lik.	−26.829	−24.730	−506.198	−490.110
RMSE	0.21	0.21	0.24	0.23

Table 6: Robustness check II

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Fear of losing/changing profession	38.690	1.779		
	(4213.436)	(1.332)		
Current economic situation (subjective)			0.603**	0.889***
			(0.210)	(0.236)
Trust in parliament	18.464		−0.240*	
	(2106.718)		(0.120)	
Trust in parties		0.346		−0.178
		(0.609)		(0.156)
Trust in parliament x Fear of losing/changing profession	−18.899			
	(2106.718)			
Trust in parties x Fear of losing/changing profession		−0.612		
		(0.500)		
Trust in parliament x Current econ. situation			−0.102*	
			(0.047)	
Trust in parties x Current econ. situation				−0.146*
				(0.060)
Age	−0.023	−0.020	0.003	−0.002
	(0.047)	(0.039)	(0.006)	(0.006)
Female dummy	−20.322	−17.727	−0.898***	−0.947***
	(8816.272)	(2112.882)	(0.201)	(0.202)
Household income	0.436	0.027	−0.028	−0.027
	(0.339)	(0.191)	(0.046)	(0.044)
Rurality of place of residence	0.205	0.086	0.135	0.097
	(0.367)	(0.314)	(0.088)	(0.086)
No Abitur dummy	1.168	0.632	0.674**	0.787***
	(1.082)	(0.985)	(0.233)	(0.230)
West Germany dummy	−1.391	−1.445	−1.050***	−1.116***
	(0.997)	(0.886)	(0.188)	(0.188)
Num.Obs.	155	156	2351	2341
AIC	56.5	64.8	865.1	885.4
BIC	86.9	95.3	922.8	943.0
Log.Lik.	−18.228	−22.388	−422.563	−432.693
RMSE	0.19	0.20	0.22	0.22