

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

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Introduction

- State research questions.
- Structure of essay.

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 ran on an anti-Euro platform in the 2013 federal election (Grimm 2015), failing to clear the five-percent threshold for parliamentary representation only by a whisker.¹ Starting in mid 2015, as the influx of refugees rose, the AfD increasingly morphed into a nationalistic, anti-immigration party (Arzheimer 2017; Arzheimer and Berning 2019; Cantoni, Hagemeister, and Westcott 2020). With the salience of immigration high during the 2017 federal election (Kellermann and Winter 2022), the AfD won 12.6% of party votes, making it the largest opposition party. The AfD's entry into the *Bundestag* 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; Arzheimer 2009) – gaining greater attention in both other disciplines² and public discourse.

While much of the debate on the demand-side determinants of radical-right voting has focused on the relative importance of economic and cultural factors respectively,³ 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 likely 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). This set of theoretical hypotheses - though often not explicitly acknowledged by non-political-scientists - echo 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

¹The AfD won 4.7% of the party votes (*Zweitstimmen*).

²Guriev and Papaioannou (2022) do an excellent job of summarising especially economists' contributions to the literature on the determinants of voting for populist parties.

³Those on the economic side of the debate mostly do not deny the importance of cultural factors, such as nativist attitudes - but attribute these attitudes to economic factors or shocks (e.g. Colantone and Stanig 2019; Colantone, Ottaviano, and Stanig 2021). The cultural camp (Art 2022), by contrast, sees such attitudes, at least in part, as exogenous to economic shocks, instead, conceiving of them as the key background condition without which economic insecurity would not have given rise to the electoral success of populists (Margalit 2019; Margalit, Raviv, and Solodoch 2022).

of representational deficits in driving populist support (e.g. Manow 2020; Schäfer and Zürn 2021; Zürn 2022; Silva and Wratil 2023). More importantly, these hypotheses have been subjected to little empirical testing, with Ivanov (2023) being a notable exception, as, for instance, 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.

Theory and case selection

To the end, let me expatiate on the theoretical intuition outlined above. Like many economic-insecurity-centred theories of radical right support, the theoretical argument starts from the observation that economic shocks, such as automation (Boix 2019) or 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 2018; Milner 2021), in general, but also for Germany, in particular (Dauth, Findeisen, and Suedekum 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 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.⁴

These two reasons also show why the theory predicts economic losers to turn to radical right parties, as opposed to left-wing parties, as a result of their grievances. 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 by Linz (1978), the reason is that losers, as Eichengreen (2018) notes, regard left-wing parties as loyal to the political system and in cahoots with the other mainstream actors. So, their redistributive promises lack credibility. By contrast, radical right parties' semi-loyalty or disloyalty to the system means that voting for them increase 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)⁵ three testable hypotheses.

- H1: Economic insecurity, *ceteris paribus*, increases 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 interests 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.

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

⁴This ‘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).

⁵Naturally, 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 and my focus on how these two factors moderate the effects of economic security, I prescind from testing these two hypotheses.

pandemic, which caused widespread financial insecurity among German households, with more than one-third of households reporting in early 2021 that they would be unable to cover unexpected expenses of €2.000 within one month and had already started tapping into their rainy-day funds (Cziriak 2022). Secondly, the pandemic was, as in most other countries, a politically contentious period, causing deep divides over the desirability and efficacy of both 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. 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.

Data, variables and operationalisation

To test the above hypotheses, I use the *German Longitudinal Election Study's* (GLES) 2021 post-election survey⁶ - 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.

- How do I operationalise economic insecurity?
 - unemployed (actual experience) (unemp_at_least_one_year)
 - fear of job loss (job_loss_year_next2yrs)
 - fear of losing profession or having to change profession (profession_loss_next2yrs)
 - subjective evaluation of current economic situation
- How do I operationalise lack of representation?
 - no difference who one is voting for
 - no difference who governs

Table 1: Summary of variables and their operationalisation

Variable	Operationalisation	Survey item(s)
dependent variable		
Radical right voting	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
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
	trust in politicians	q79d

* 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.

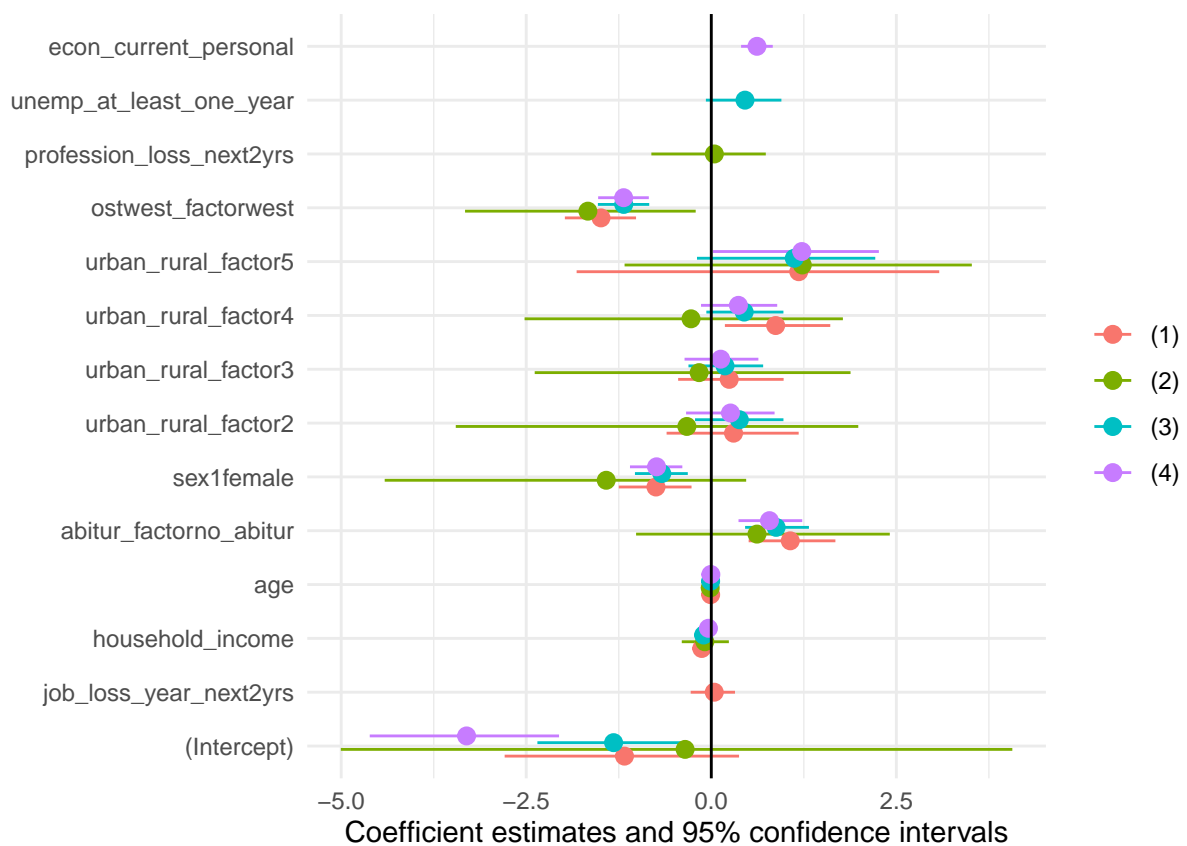
- dependent variable -> binary, Why?
 - Eichengreen focuses mainly on radical right, as Sonin notes

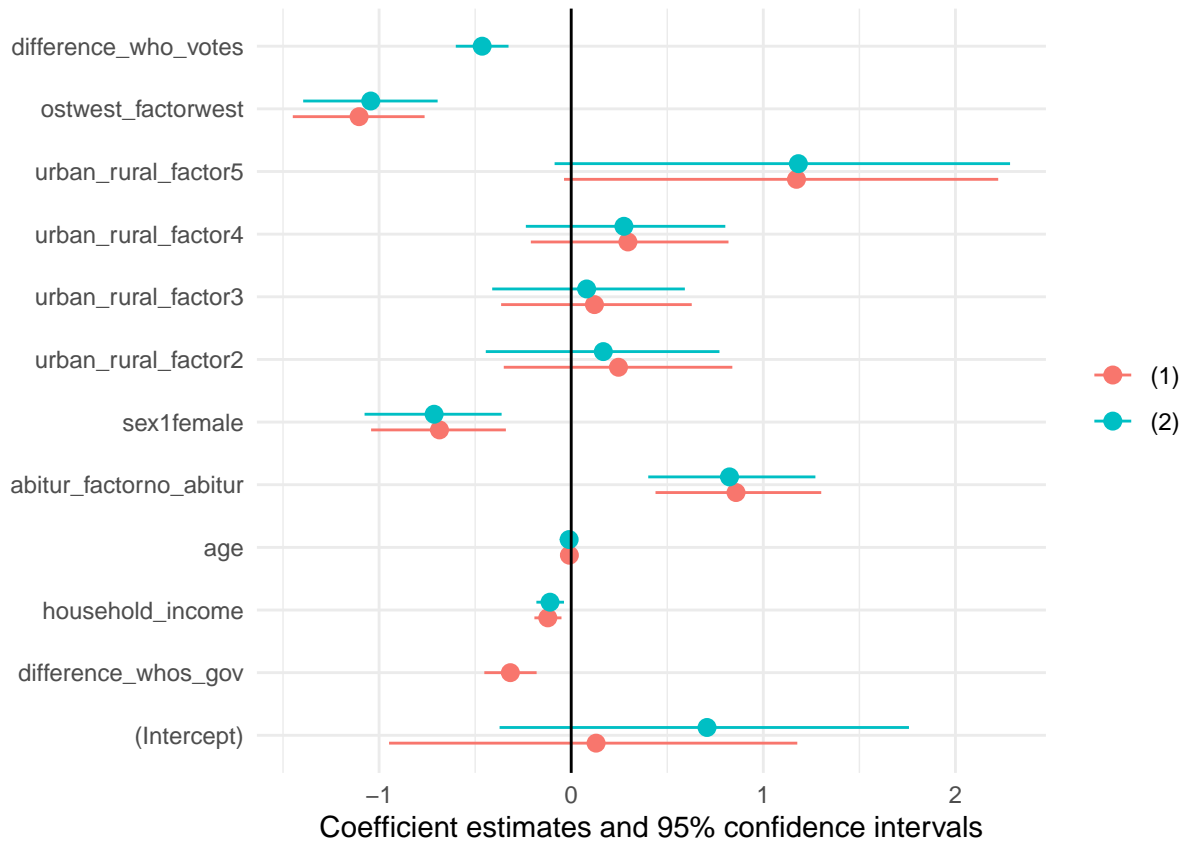
⁶The data for the 2021 *Nachwahlbefragung* are available [here](#).

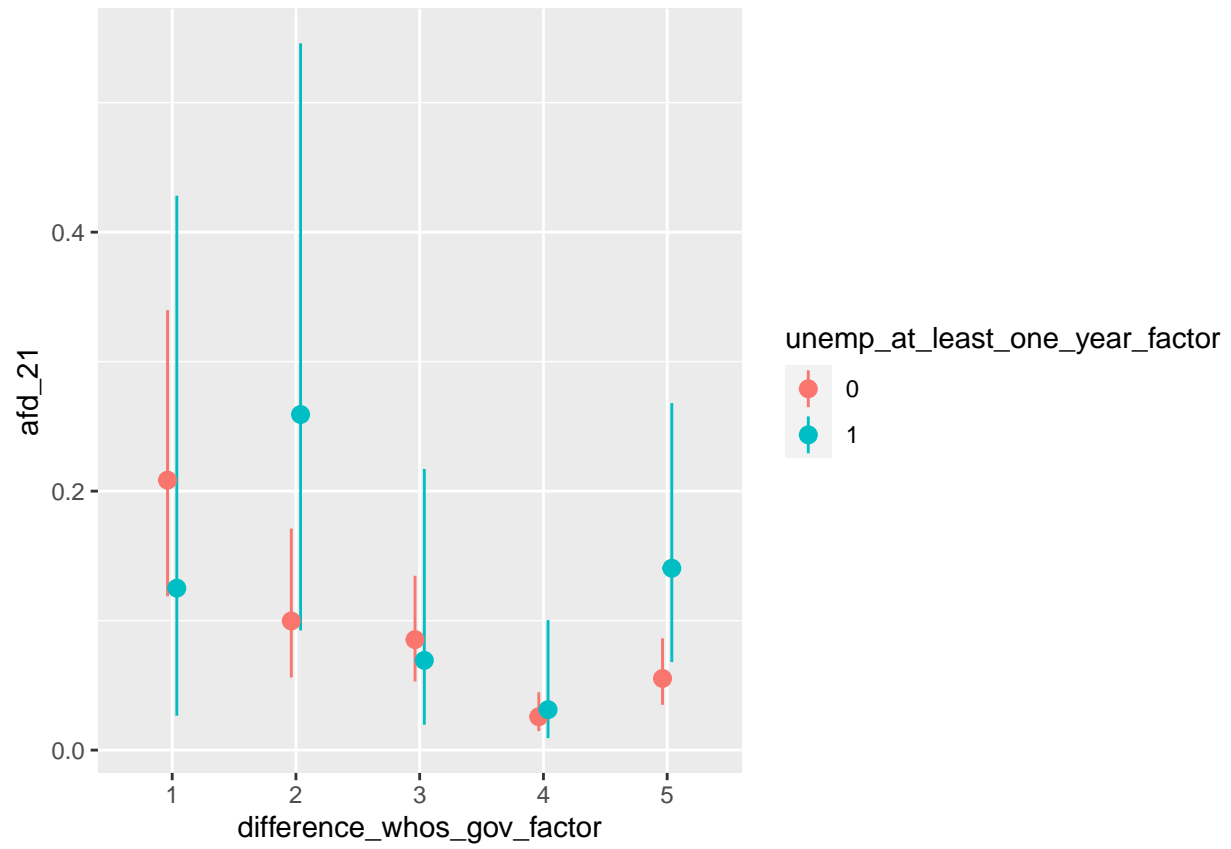
- hence focus justified
- proxy for economic insecurity -> justification

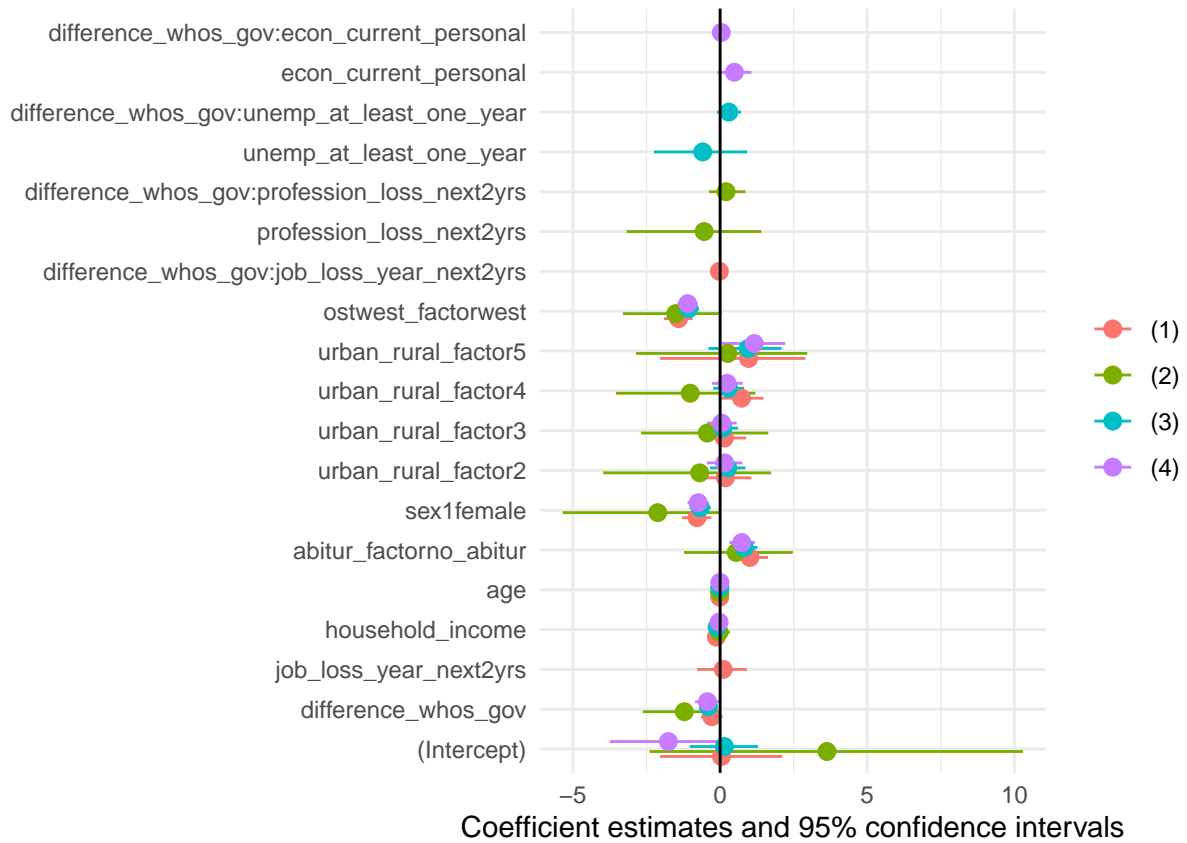
Methodology and Results

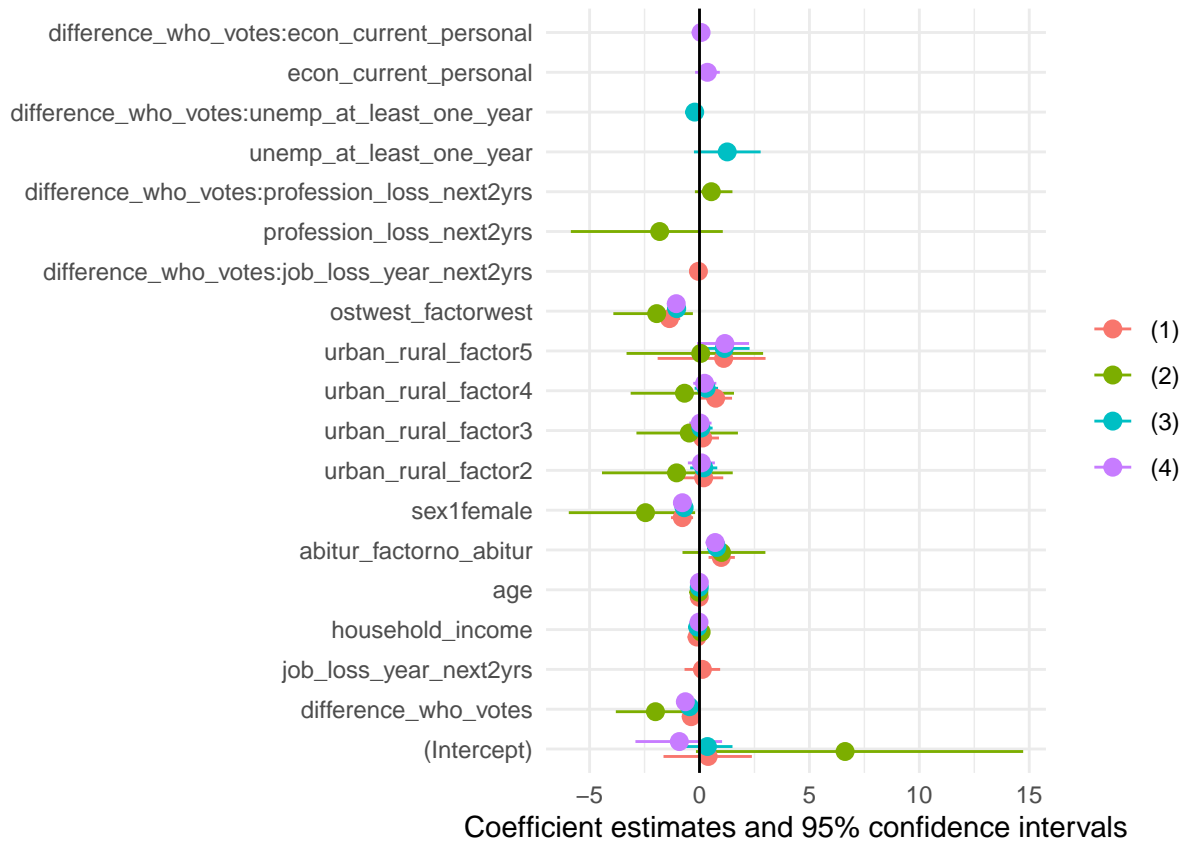
- Justify model specification.
- DAG would be cool, but probably not possible.
- Presentation of results + interpretation.
- Caveats.
 - not causal, correlational analysis











Conclusion

- I find only extremely weak support for Eichengreen's theory.

References

Appendix

Descriptive statistics

Robustness checks

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