# The Stories We Tell:
## Societal Narratives and Support for the Far Right

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**Abstract**

In two studies using AI-assisted qualitative interviews, we ask a representative sample of the German electorate ($N = 1,013$) to reflect on the most important societal events of the last 15 years. We document that far-right supporters construct systematically different narratives about the recent past. First, they recall different events—with a strong focus on migration-related issues. Second, even when they do consider the same events, they are more likely to blame the establishment and describe events more negatively and with greater emotional intensity. We further document that these narratives are associated with policy preferences, and that far-right supporters are more inclined than supporters of other parties to prioritize cultural over economic issues. Together, our findings reveal that partisan divides extend to how citizens remember and interpret shared national experiences.

**Keywords:** Polarization, Narratives, AI-Assisted Qualitative Interviews, Explanations, Mental Models.

**JEL Codes:** D01, C90, D84

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# 1 Introduction

How individuals understand the past may shape how they interpret the present and how they believe society should evolve in the future. Studying the narratives individuals hold about the past is thus central for understanding beliefs and preferences in a society. Importantly, such narratives may be contested: as scholars of collective memory have emphasized, there is "no universal memory" (Halbwachs, 1950), but rather "as many collective memories as there are groups" (Coser, 1992). [1] One reason for this fragmentation is that the past constitutes a vast and complex dataset. To make sense of it, people must both select which events to attend to, and construct an interpretation that ties those events together. Differences in narratives about the past can thus arise along two dimensions: (i) which events are *top of mind*—i.e., which events individuals selectively recall or attend to—and (ii) how individuals interpret and attach significance to those events.

In this paper, we provide large-scale evidence on both selective recall and interpretation of the recent past. To do so, we conduct two politically representative surveys of the German electorate. In the first, individuals state what they consider to be the three most important societal events of the last 15 years, and then provide their interpretation of each event in a qualitative interview. In the second, we fix the events and ask individuals to provide their interpretations. This allows us to examine both which events are *top of mind* and how the same events are interpreted by different groups. Our key comparison is between supporters of the far right and supporters of other political parties. This focus is motivated by the recent rise of far-right parties around the world, which is one of the most consequential developments in contemporary democratic politics (Mudde, 2007, 2019). Especially in Europe, the growing electoral success of these parties has reshaped political competition, created new political cleavages, and contributed to rising political polarization (Iyengar and Westwood, 2015; Iyengar et al., 2019; Enke, 2020; Callander and Carbajal, 2022). Thus, examining whether far-right supporters differ in their representations of the recent past offers important insights into one of the main divisions in current society.

In both studies, we rely on AI-assisted qualitative interviews to examine which events

[1] The social and political importance of memory has historically been emphasized across several disciplines, including in philosophical work on memory and personal identity (Locke, 1690), psychological research on the reconstructive nature of remembering (Bartlett, 1932), and sociological analyses of collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992), imagined communities and national identity (Anderson, 1983), and the invention of tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). In the economics literature, recent work has also started to explore the implications of how individuals remember the past for their behavior in the present (e.g., Dessi, 2008; Bordalo et al., 2020; Zimmermann, 2020; Müller, 2022; Amelio and Zimmermann, 2023; Bordalo et al., 2023; Fouka and Voth, 2023; Bordalo et al., 2025; Charles, 2025; Gödker et al., 2025; Charles and Sui, 2026). We contribute to the literature by examining heterogeneity in which recent events are *top of mind* and how they are interpreted.

are *top of mind* and how people interpret them. This emerging methodology allows us to combine the depth of qualitative interviews with the scale of quantitative surveys (Geiecke and Jaravel, 2024; Chopra and Haaland, 2025). The AI-powered interview platform we use in both studies is programmed to allow for structured but flexible conversations. Unlike standard survey instruments, which rely on predefined response categories, this approach allows participants to express their views in their own words and enables the interviewer to probe responses through adaptive follow-up questions. Indeed, the vast majority of our textual data (83%) emerge from these follow-up interactions rather than from participants' initial answers. The result is a rich qualitative dataset that allows us to study not only *what* people talk about but also *how* they describe and interpret events.

In Study 1, we ask people to freely recall what they consider to be the three most important societal events or developments that shaped Germany over the last 15 years, allowing us to measure what is *top of mind*.[2] We find that far-right supporters systematically recall different events from those recalled by supporters of other political parties. This pattern is particularly pronounced for migration-related events: 65% of far-right supporters mention a migration-related event first, whereas only 35% of supporters of other political parties do so. Moreover, the interviews reveal striking differences in how these events are described. While far-right supporters are more likely to discuss migration in the context of increasing crime rates and economic pressures, supporters of other political parties are more likely to focus on challenges for social cohesion and growing support for the far right in response to migration. This highlights how different events are *top of mind* across political parties and that the events are often assigned different meanings, with each meaning linked to distinct political and societal responses.

To disentangle differences in interpretation from differences in event selection, Study 2 presents all participants with the same three events and examines whether their interpretations differ systematically across party lines. We selected three events commonly mentioned in a pilot study: the 2015 refugee crisis (migration), the Fridays for Future protests (climate), and the rising costs of living and rents (the economy). We find that far-right supporters interpret and describe the same events differently from supporters of other parties. In particular, far-right supporters are more likely to blame the establishment, express more negative sentiment, and use more emotionally intense language when describing events.

Finally, we combine the qualitative interviews with open-ended questions that elicit participants' political visions for Germany's future, asking them to describe three policies that they would like to see implemented in the future. We find that far-right sup-

[2]For simplicity, throughout the paper we will use the term "events" to refer to both events and developments.

porters differ from others in the types of policies they demand: far-right supporters are significantly more likely than supporters of other parties to prioritize cultural over economic policies. These cultural policy preferences are largely concentrated on responses to migration, highlighting a systematic association between the past events that are salient to participants and their policy priorities.

Taken together, we find that far-right supporters diverge from supporters of other parties in both what is *top of mind* and how past events are interpreted: they focus more on migration, assign more blame to the establishment, and describe events more negatively and with greater emotional intensity. These differences correlate systematically with people's visions for their country's future.

These results speak to the broader question of whether and how supporters of the far right differ from others in their interpretation of the recent past. The increase in support for far-right parties in the last decades is a highly relevant phenomenon in many countries across the democratic world (Mudde, 2007; Inglehart and Norris, 2016b; Mudde, 2019). Our setting, Germany, is an example of this shift. In Germany, the prominent far-right party is the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). Founded in 2013 by economists and conservative journalists opposed to the eurozone bailouts, the party initially focused almost exclusively on dissolving the common currency. Its character changed after the large-scale arrival of asylum seekers in 2015 as immigration became an increasingly salient political issue, and immigration became the AfD's defining agenda. The party entered the Bundestag in 2017 with 12.6% of the vote, and received 20.8% of the vote in the 2025 federal election, thus becoming the second-largest political party in Germany. For a more detailed account of the German political landscape, see Appendix A. Throughout the paper, we use "far-right supporters" and "AfD supporters" interchangeably to refer to participants who state that they support the AfD, and "non-AfD supporters" for all other participants who state a different party preference.

*Related Literature.* This paper contributes to two distinct literatures. First, we speak to a growing body of research in economics on societal narratives and collective memories. Following this literature, we conceptualize narratives as sense-making explanations that provide a particular interpretation of a collection of events.[3] The collection of events we focus on consists of those that occurred in Germany over the last 15 years, and the narrative interpretations may contain features such as causal relations (e.g., who is to blame for an event) and emotional significance. Such narratives are not only interesting stories; they have also been shown to affect individual attitudes and behavior, from economic and financial decisions through political mobilization to policy preferences (Shiller, 2017; Eliaz and Spiegler, 2020; Gehring et al., 2022; Guriev and Papaioan-

[3]For a more detailed discussion of the conceptualization of narratives in economics, see, e.g., Barron and Fries (2024).

nou, 2022; Alesina et al., 2023; Ambuehl and Thysen, 2024; André et al., 2025; Barron et al., 2025; Barron and Fries, 2025; Charles and Kendall, 2025). This is not only true for narratives that make sense of the current world, but also for historical narratives (Esposito et al., 2023; Ochsner and Roesel, 2024). Previous work has shown that partisans can hold systematically different beliefs about the same objective facts (Bartels, 2002; Alesina et al., 2020), and that engaging with political values can shift factual beliefs in ways that reinforce partisan identities (Thaler, 2024; Barron et al., 2025). Closely related to our goal of understanding how collective memories differ across political parties, Ramos-Toro and Voytas (2024) show that conservatives and liberals in the U.S. hold distinct historical narratives on the Civil War, the legacy of slavery, and the Civil Rights Movement. We extend this line of work by focusing on the very recent past, the last 15 years, and by showing that even events that have not yet fully crystallized into long-standing collective memories are selectively recalled and interpreted differently across social groups.

Second, we contribute to the literature on the rise of far-right parties in recent years. A large body of work in economics and political science has sought to identify the drivers of far-right support, emphasizing economic shocks such as trade exposure and austerity (Colantone and Stanig, 2018; Fetzer, 2019; Autor et al., 2020), cultural backlash against immigration and social change (Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014; Otto and Steinhardt, 2014; Halla et al., 2017; Dustmann et al., 2019; Edo et al., 2019; Hangartner et al., 2019; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Adena and Huck, 2024), as well as declining trust in mainstream institutions (Algan et al., 2017; Guiso et al., 2017). This distrust has also been identified as part of far-right rhetoric, which portrays mainstream parties as an establishment that has failed ordinary citizens (Mudde, 2007; Arzheimer, 2023) and which often uses strong, emotionally charged appeals (Gennaro and Ash, 2022; Caiani and Cocco, 2023). We differ from previous work by focusing not on structural determinants but on far-right supporters' subjective accounts of recent history, and we document substantial differences across political affiliations in what is remembered as politically relevant and in how recent events are interpreted.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 explains our experimental design and preregistered hypotheses with a careful discussion of the use of AI-assisted interviews. Section 3 presents our results, and Section 4 concludes.

# 2 Experimental Design

## 2.1 AI-Assisted Interviews

To conduct AI-assisted interviews, we employ the methodology developed by Chopra and Haaland (2025). The interviews are conducted in German in written form, with

follow-up questions formulated by generative AI. The key advantage of this methodology is that it combines qualitative depth with quantitative scale. The method is especially valuable for studying citizens' perceptions of major societal developments, as it allows for follow-up questions even when researchers do not know ex ante which events, interpretations, or narratives will be mentioned by a respondent. Closed-ended survey questions risk constraining responses to researcher-defined categories, whereas AI-assisted interviews allow participants to identify and explain the events they consider important in their own words. The iterative probing process further elicits underlying beliefs and causal interpretations that are typically difficult to capture through standard survey instruments or single open-ended questions.

The interviewer consists of four separate agents, each assigned a specific task and given separate instructions.[4] First, the *topic agent* introduces topics as specified by the researchers. In our case, the opening question prompts participants to think about the three most important events in Germany over the last 15 years and asks them to reflect on these events one at a time (see Figure 1 for an example).[5] The *probing agent* then generates a fixed number of follow-up, or probing, questions for each topic. This agent is crucial in producing data that go beyond traditional open-ended responses. Whereas participants might be brief in single open-ended responses, the probing agent digs deeper, eliciting more detailed responses and resolving ambiguities in participants' answers. The third agent is the *moderator agent*. Its task is to moderate the conversation and ensure that participants stay on topic and do not produce nonsensical or inappropriate responses. For societal and political narratives, as in our case, this agent is particularly important for ensuring an informative and constructive interview flow. If participants are flagged three times by the moderator agent, the interview is automatically terminated. Finally, the *summary agent* keeps a live summary of the conversation, which is provided to the other agents so that they can generate the most meaningful questions.

To implement the interviewer, we use GPT-4o via an API embedded in a Qualtrics survey. The interviewer itself is hosted on a distinct web server that is accessed by Qualtrics during the interview. This ensures that LLM processing is handled outside the survey interface and that participants cannot access or manipulate the interviewer through their web browsers during the study. In addition, hosting the interviewer separately allows us to provide sufficient computing power without relying on the participants' own machines. Copying and pasting were disabled during the interviews to ensure that participants answered all questions themselves.

[4]Prompts for all agents in Study 1 and Study 2 are provided in Appendix C.

[5]Interview excerpts provided in this paper have been selected to illustrate specific coding categories, and are reproduced verbatim (in translation). Any factual claims they contain reflect the respondents' perceptions and should not be read as statements of fact.

Figure 1: AI-Assisted Interview Excerpt (Translated): Opening Prompt in Study 1 and Example

**ID 11797**

**Interviewer:** *Over the last 15 years, a great deal has happened in Germany—politically, socially, and economically. We are interested in which events and developments stand out to you.*

*We would therefore ask you to name* ***three societal events or developments*** *that, in your view, have especially shaped Germany over the last 15 years (since 2011).*

*We will go through all three events or developments one after another—let us start with the first: which event or development comes to mind first?*

**Respondent:** *Illegal immigration, as well as the intake of refugees in general—I find it very challenging because it overwhelms the bureaucracy.*

**Interviewer:** *How, in your view, has the intake of refugees affected society and everyday life in Germany?*

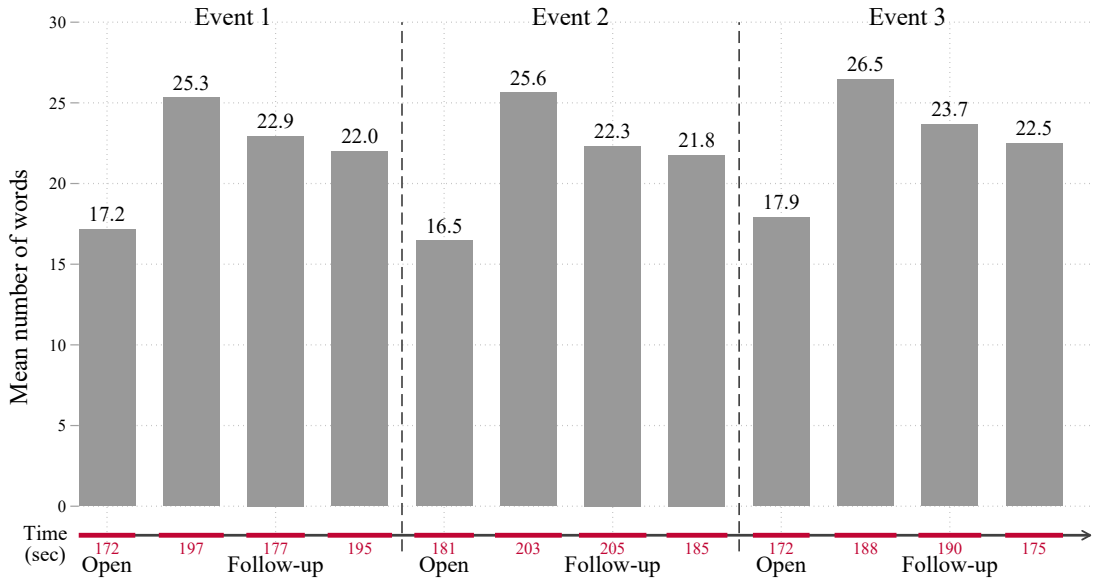
**Respondent:** *Money is unjustly paid out to refugees who should not be receiving it. They cost us more than they benefit us. On top of that, crime problems have worsened.*

*Note.* The opening text by the interviewer is hard-coded and thus always identical across interviews. The Respondent text represents an example response from one of the survey respondents. The second text by the interviewer picks up the theme that was brought up by the respondent and starts asking probing questions

For our study, we provide the interviewer with guidelines containing three distinct topics, each referring to one event in the last 15 years. In Study 1, these are not predefined and participants identify what is *top of mind*. In Study 2, each topic is predetermined and shown in random order; we ask participants about the 2015 refugee crisis (migration), the Fridays for Future protests (climate), and the rising costs of living and rents (the economy). In addition, for each event we ask three follow-up questions generated by the AI. Although we do not have full control over these questions, we provide clear instructions to the AI about how to probe for personal perceptions of the discussed events and their impact on Germany. During piloting, we determined that three follow-up questions strike a good balance between eliciting depth and avoiding repetition. Because the events are predetermined in Study 2, we ask the three probing questions without an opening question. Thus, a complete interview consists of 12 questions in Study 1 and 9 questions in Study 2, with each participant covering all three events.

The median duration of an interview was 14.5 minutes, and participants wrote an average of 227.2 words per interview (25th percentile = 104; 75th percentile = 296). To illustrate the response behavior, Figure 2 shows the average number of words as well as the duration of each response. In support of the use of AI interviews rather than a single open-ended question, most of our interview data (83.3%) are elicited by follow-up questions. Additionally, we find no evidence of fatigue, as would be indicated by a

Figure 2: Response Behavior During AI-Assisted Interview




*Note.* Opening questions only use data from Study 1 (events are predetermined in Study 2) The three follow-up questions pool data from both studies.

reduction in response length toward the end of the interview. We also asked participants about their perceptions of the AI interviewer and found that 78% reported a positive experience with the interviewer and 75% reported that the conversation felt natural. These figures closely resemble those reported by Chopra and Haaland (2025), who find corresponding shares of 82% and 73% in their setting.

## 2.2 Survey

We complement the AI-assisted interviews by including survey questions in Study 1 and Study 2. To understand how narratives about the recent past are linked to support for future policies, we first ask participants to mention three concrete policies that an ideal party should implement. The question is phrased as follows:

> *Imagine you could decide what an ideal political party in Germany should stand for. When you think about life in Germany today – which 3 concrete measures should this ideal party implement most urgently in your opinion?*
>
> *Measure 1: [Open text]*
> *Measure 2: [Open text]*
> *Measure 3: [Open text]*

Afterwards, we use closed-ended questions to elicit participants' trust in politicians, their perceptions of Germany's development, their support for liberal democracy (Claassen

et al., 2025), and whether they vote in favor of a party (positive voting) or against the other parties (negative voting). In addition, we elicit their opinion on all parties using feeling thermometers (ANES, 1968) and ask demographic questions.

## 2.3 Procedures

We recruited participants using interlocked quota sampling, with quotas defined for each combination of political party support, age (18–34, 35–59, and 60+), and gender. Quotas were set to reflect the distribution of votes in the 2025 German federal election and calculated using published election data from the Federal Returning Officer (www.bundeswahlleiterin.de). In addition, we reserved 10% of the sample for participants who did not wish to reveal their political preferences. This allows us to study selection into stating political preferences across both studies; as preregistered, the main analyses include only participants who stated their political preferences. Recruitment was conducted through the panel provider Bilendi, which maintains pre-recruited online access panels with multiple measures in place to prevent false or duplicate accounts. Bilendi also limits the frequency with which panel members are invited to participate in surveys to avoid fatigue or professionalization.

Upon entering the study, participants first provided informed consent and had to pass an attention check. Next, they answered a set of demographic questions (age, gender, political support, education level, region of residence, financial situation, and employment status), which we used to screen participants according to our predefined quotas. Upon passing the screening, participants had to complete two additional checks, which we included to ensure high-quality data. First, we used a honeypot question to detect and exclude bots. Second, participants were asked to answer an unrelated open-ended question to assess their willingness to provide text responses (expressing their view on a four-day work week). Participants whose responses contained fewer than 40 characters were excluded from the study. After completing these steps and applying additional preregistered exclusions for incomplete responses and speeding, our final sample consists of 1,013 participants (Study 1: $n = 505$; Study 2: $n = 508$; see power analysis in Appendix B).

Of the main sample of participants who state their political preference, 33.2% support the CDU/CSU, 24.1% the AfD, 18.9% the SPD, 14.0% the Greens, and 9.9% the Left. The mean age is 53.4 years (SD = 15.8), 51.3% of respondents are female, and the sample includes broad variation in education, with 34.9% holding a university degree and 40.9% reporting a secondary school qualification as their highest level of education. In addition, 81.7% of participants report currently living in West Germany, 14.2% in East Germany, and 4.0% in Berlin. Comparing these characteristics with those reported in the 2025 German microcensus, we find that our sample approximates the adult German

population on key observables: the mean age among adults is 51.8 years, 50.9% are female, and 80.7% live in West Germany. However, our sample is more educated, with 55.3% having attained a university entrance qualification (Abitur) vs. only 38.6% in the electorate. Moreover, while we observe representative shares across East and West Germany, the proportions of each party's supporters are not representative within each of these regions.

Finally, we compare AfD and non-AfD supporters within our sample. We find that AfD supporters are 3.9 years younger than non-AfD supporters, 8.5pp more likely to be male, and 24.9pp more likely to live in East Germany. They are 14.1pp less likely to hold a university degree and 5.4pp more likely to work part-time or be unemployed. These differences mirror well-documented demographic patterns of the AfD electorate, providing further reassurance that our sample resembles the demographic composition of the electorate (Kühling et al., 2025).

## 2.4 Hypotheses

Our four preregistered hypotheses are motivated by the idea that far-right supporters may hold different beliefs and attitudes about the world. If so, these differences likely shape not just their policy preferences but also which events they remember and how they interpret them.

**H1: Shared Partisan Memory.** Our first hypothesis uses the responses from Study 1. Previous work has shown that partisans can hold systematically different beliefs about the same objective facts (Bartels, 2002; Alesina et al., 2020; Thaler, 2024; Barron et al., 2025). We hypothesize that they may also process and interpret events differently as they occur, such that different events come to mind when prompted about which events have been most important over the last 15 years. Moreover, given the strong link between opposition to immigration and far-right support, migration-related events may be particularly *top of mind* for AfD supporters.

**H1a.** *The events that come to mind first differ systematically across supporters of different political parties.*

**H1b.** *AfD supporters are more likely to mention migration-related events as their first recalled event compared to supporters of other parties.*

**H2: Assigning Responsibility to the Establishment.** Next, we examine the interpretations of a fixed set of events, using the responses from Study 2. Far-right parties define themselves in part through opposition to a political "establishment" that they portray as self-serving and unresponsive to citizens' concerns (Mudde, 2007; Arzheimer,

2023). Individuals who share this view of politics should be more inclined than others to assign responsibility for negative events to the establishment. In our preregistration, we define the establishment as government officials, economic elites, mainstream media, and cultural leaders.

**H2.** *For negative events, AfD supporters are more likely to assign responsibility to the establishment than non-AfD supporters.*

**H3: Emotions.** In addition to differences in *what* participants address, there may also be a difference in *how* they address it. Far-right support has been shown to be closely tied to feelings of cultural threat and the sense that the country is heading in the wrong direction (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Moreover, far-right communication is often described as relying on emotional appeals (Gennaro and Ash, 2022; Caiani and Cocco, 2023). We therefore expect the narratives of AfD supporters to be more negative in tone and more emotionally charged, even when describing the same events.

**H3a.** *The narratives of AfD supporters express more negative sentiment than the narratives of non-AfD supporters.*

**H3b.** *The narratives of AfD supporters display greater emotional intensity than the narratives of non-AfD supporters.*

**H4: Cultural vs. Economic Policy Demands.** Finally, if the hypothesized differences in narratives about society and the recent past exist, we would expect these different understandings to lead to differences in participants' policy demands for the future. As cultural factors such as national identity play a central role in far-right ideology (Mudde, 2007; Inglehart and Norris, 2016a; Norris and Inglehart, 2019), we expect the policy demands of AfD supporters to center on cultural rather than economic issues.

**H4.** *When asked what actions an ideal party in power should take, AfD supporters are more likely than non-AfD supporters to emphasize culture-related changes, whereas non-AfD supporters are more likely to emphasize economic changes.*

# 3 Results

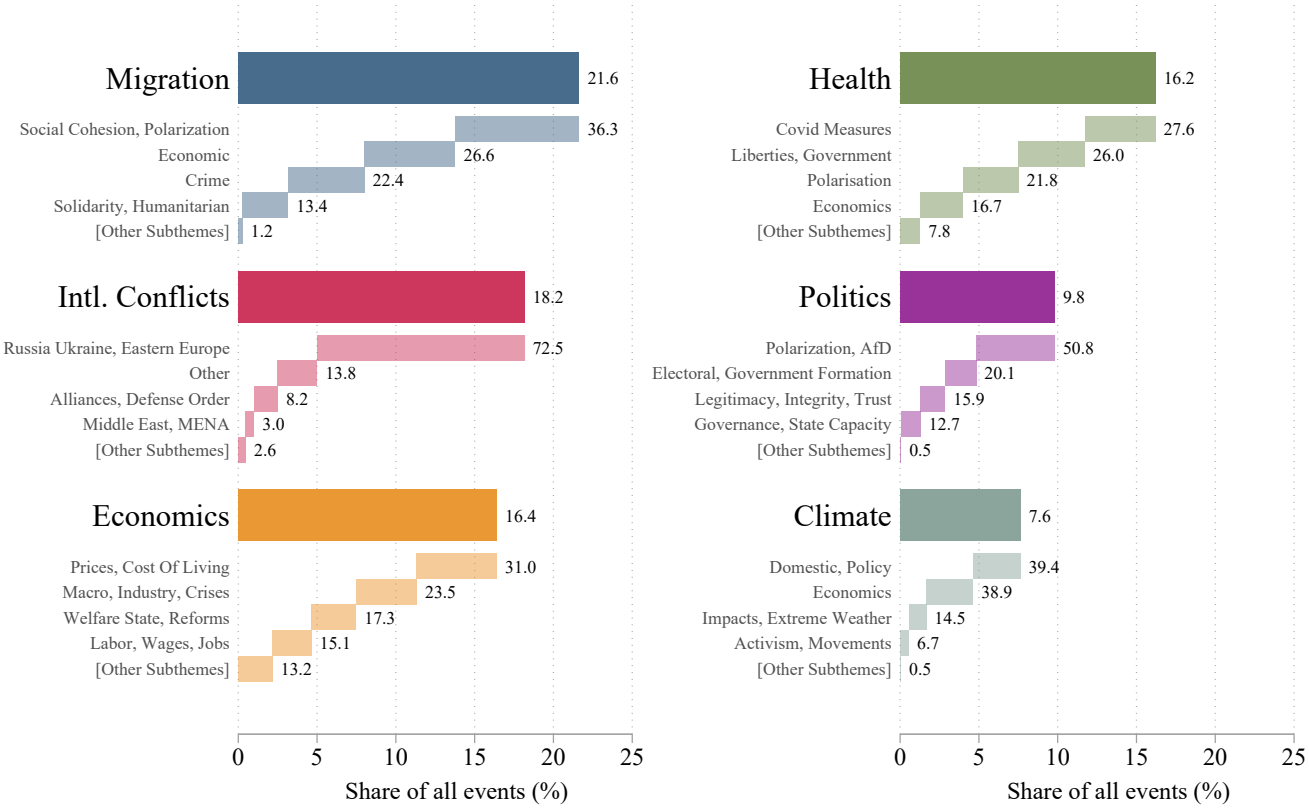
## 3.1 Descriptives—Events Mentioned (Study 1)

To process the qualitative data, we follow our preregistered two-step procedure. First, two human coders, blind to our hypotheses, examine a random 10% sample of qualitative data (interviews and open-ended policy demands) using a detailed codebook. Interrater agreement between the two human coders across the variables used in the analysis ranges from 80–90%.

Second, we use 80% of the human-coded data to fine-tune an open-weight LLM (Qwen3-32B). We then utilize the remaining 20% data to perform an out-of-sample test of our fine-tuned model. We find that model–human agreement is on average 1.5pp higher ($p = .079$) than human–human agreement. Following this validation, we code all responses using the fine-tuned model. Because we employ an open-weight model (Qwen3-32B) with a temperature parameter set to zero, researchers may directly apply the same model weights and deterministic decoding settings to replicate our coding pipeline. This is an advantage over using proprietary models whose weights and implementations are not publicly available.

Figure 3 summarizes which events are *top of mind* across all named events and participants in Study 1. We find that the most commonly mentioned category relates to migration (21.6% of all mentioned events); in fact, 81.5% of all participants refer to a migration-related event at some point during their interview. Other commonly mentioned categories are international conflicts (18.2%), economic issues (16.4%), health (16.2%), politics (9.8%), and climate-related events (7.6%). When we examine how people talk about migration, we find that 36.3% of migration narratives concern challenges for social co-

Figure 3: *Top-of-mind* Events




*Note.* The six most frequently mentioned event categories in Study 1 and subthemes used to describe them. Each respondent could name up to three events, and each event could be assigned multiple subthemes. Main bars show each event category's share of all event mentions. Subtheme bars are normalized to sum to 100% within their event.

hesion, which is also frequently mentioned in narratives concerning health and politics. In addition, health, climate, and migration accounts frequently invoke economic issues; participants often describe economic problems as consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate policies, or migration.

## 3.2 Shared Partisan Memory (Study 1)

We next test our preregistered hypotheses. First, we examine whether there are systematic differences among supporters of different parties in the first event that comes to mind (H1a). To test this hypothesis, we use data from Study 1, which involves free recall. Within our data, the key event categories are migration, the economy, health, climate, international conflicts, national politics, the EU, crime, social developments, technology/media, and 'other'. To test our hypothesis, we conduct a chi-squared test of independence between participants' political affiliation and their first-mentioned event. In line with our hypothesis, we find that supporters of different parties mention different events first (Cramér's $V = .209$, $p < .001$).

Looking more closely at the difference between AfD and non-AfD supporters, we hypothesized that AfD supporters would be more likely to mention a migration-related event as the first event (H1b). As seen in Table 1, our data are in line with this hypothesis: 64.3% of AfD supporters mention a migration-related event first, whereas this is only true for 35.2% of non-AfD supporters. Non-AfD supporters instead recall a broader set of events, with more participants mentioning health-related events (particularly COVID-19) as well as political and economic developments.

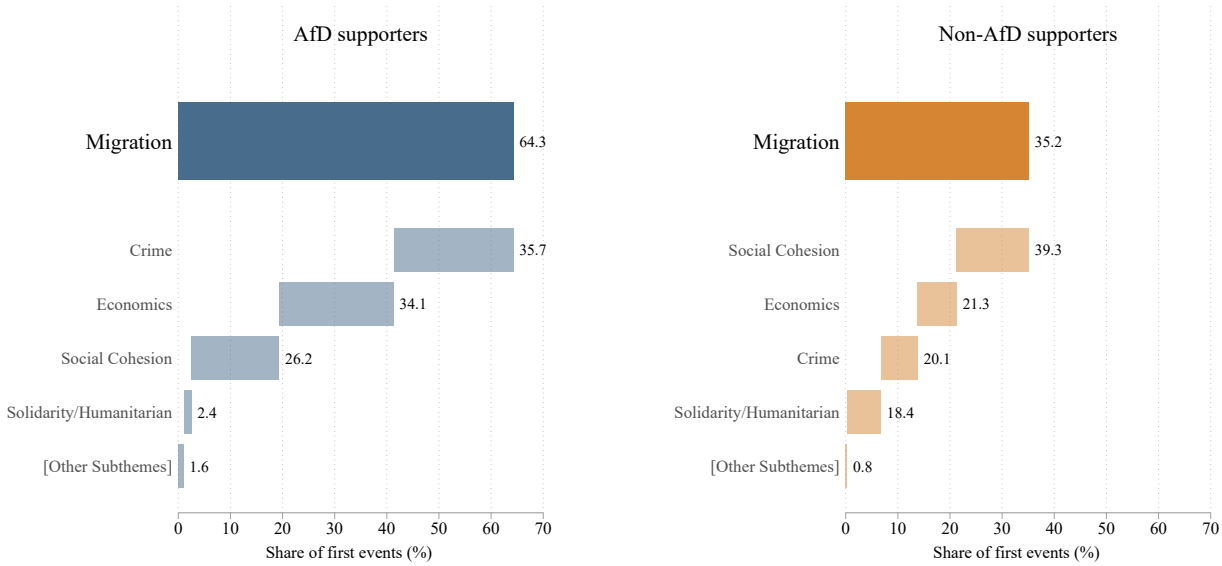
To test formally whether AfD supporters differ from supporters of other parties, we estimate a logit regression with a binary dependent variable equal to one if the respon-

Table 1: First-Recalled Events by AfD vs. Non-AfD Supporters

| **AfD supporters** | | **Non-AfD supporters** | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Event Category | Share | Event Category | Share |
| Migration | 64.3% | Migration | 35.2% |
| Health | 11.6% | Health | 22.8% |
| Economy | 9.8% | National politics | 11.5% |
| Intl. Conflicts | 4.5% | Economy | 10.1% |
| National politics | 4.5% | Intl. Conflicts | 8.4% |
| Other | 3.6% | Climate | 5.5% |
| Climate | 1.8% | Technology/media | 2.6% |
| | | Other | 1.4% |
| | | Crime | 1.2% |
| | | Social Developments | 1.2% |
| | | EU | 0.3% |

*Note.* Shares computed within each group.

Figure 4: H1b: Migration Events and Their Narratives




*Note.* Shares of AfD and non-AfD supporters mentioning migration-related events first and shares of corresponding narratives.

dent's first-recalled event is classified as migration-related and an AfD indicator as the independent variable. We find that AfD supporters are 29pp (34pp with controls) more likely to mention a migration-related event first, and the difference remains statistically significant when controlling for gender, age, education, employment status, region, city size, and self-reported financial situation ($p < .001$, see Table D.2).

Further, our rich qualitative data allow us to examine more closely how participants talk about migration-related events. Categorizing all migration-related interviews, we summarize the differences between AfD and non-AfD supporters in Figure 4: AfD supporters are more likely to mention migration in relation to increasing crime rates and economic pressures, whereas non-AfD supporters are more likely to focus on challenges for social cohesion in response to migration. The differences in how the two groups discuss migration are statistically significant ($\chi^2$-test, $p < .001$). Figure 5 illustrates the dif-

Figure 5: AI-Assisted Interview Excerpts (Translated): Migration

**ID 29537**

*"At first, there was a huge wave of willingness to help. People wanted to get to know one another. It was good not only for the refugees but also for the Germans. Unfortunately, things have since taken a different turn. There is a lot of xenophobia again. [...]"*

(Solidarity/Humanitarian)

**ID 38542**

*"The intake of refugees since 2014 was defining [...] Many refugees came who never wanted to work, but had a good life here. The social system was exploited, child benefits were transferred back to their home countries, and worst of all—the crime. [...]"*

(Economy + Crime)

ferent ways in which participants speak about migration with two excerpts from Study 1 interviews: one participant (ID 29537) talks about migration from a humanitarian perspective, while the other (ID 38542) relates the intake of refugees to economic burdens and increased crime. While these two excerpts are not representative of the full range of responses, they highlight how the same event can be discussed in strikingly different ways.

## 3.3 Assigning Responsibility to the Establishment (Study 2)

Next, we turn to the question of whether, for negative events, AfD supporters are more likely to assign responsibility to the establishment than non-AfD supporters. To this end, we use data from Study 2, which fixes the events that participants are asked about (i.e., the 2015 refugee crisis, the Fridays for Future protests, and the rising costs of living and rents).

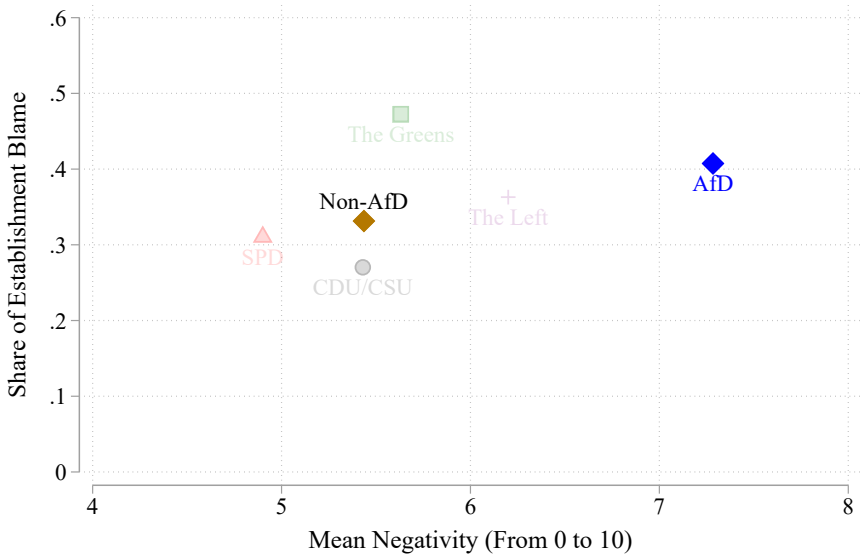
**Classifying Events as Negative or Positive.** To classify each event as either negative or positive, we ask participants to rate each of the three events on a scale from very positive (0) to very negative (10). We find that all three events are, on average, rated as negative (migration: 6.14; climate: 5.53; economy: 5.96), and the mean ratings are significantly higher than the midpoint of the scale (t-test: $p < .001$; Wilcoxon signed-rank test: $p < .001$). Thus, in line with our preregistration, the following analysis draws on data from all three events, clustering at the individual level in regression analyses.

**Responsibility Assignment.** We first consider the extent to which participants blame the establishment when discussing negative events. Among AfD supporters, we find that 41% of narratives include blame of the establishment, whereas this is only true for 33% of the narratives of non-AfD supporters. The difference is statistically significant both with and without controls (logit: $p = .005$, with controls $p = .015$, see Table D.3).[6] By contrast, praise of the establishment is rare; less than 1% for AfD supporters and 7% for non-AfD supporters (logit: $p = .001$, with controls $p = .002$) praise the establishment in their interviews.

Combining negativity ratings and blame of the establishment, we compare supporters of different parties visually in Figure 6. This figure shows that AfD supporters are generally more inclined to blame the establishment and to evaluate events more negatively. The only exception is Green supporters, who blame the establishment at an even

[6]These results connect closely to contemporaneous work on the *supply* of blame- and praise-focused rhetoric. Bilotta et al. (2026) show that more than a third of social media posts by members of the U.S. Congress assign either blame or credit, and that blame-focused messages are more effective than credit-focused ones at attracting small donations and building support.

Figure 6: Establishment Blame and Negativity Rating of Events by Party




*Note.* The figure shows the share of narratives that blame the establishment and the mean rating of Germany's development with respect to migration, the economy, and climate over the last 15 years.

higher rate than AfD supporters. A closer look at the data reveals that AfD and Green supporters blame the establishment in quite different domains. Supporters of the Greens are most likely to blame the establishment when discussing climate (51%) and least likely when discussing migration (42%). In contrast, AfD supporters are most likely to blame the establishment when discussing migration (56%) and least likely when discussing climate (21%).

## 3.4 Emotions (Study 2)

We now turn to the emotions expressed in the narratives. To this end, we examine two distinct but related dimensions: sentiment (positive versus negative) and emotional intensity (high versus low). Figure 7 provides examples from the interviews that illustrate these dimensions.

Average sentiment scores across all participants are shown in Figure 8, Panel (a). While we find that the average sentiment is quite negative across all respondents in our study, AfD supporters express even more negative sentiment in their narratives than non-AfD supporters (-2.65 vs. -1.90 on a scale from -5 to +5), consistent with H3a. The difference is statistically significant (Tobit: $p < .001$; with controls $p < .001$; see Table D.4).

The second dimension, emotional intensity, captures whether narratives are emotionally charged (positive as well as negative), as opposed to detached and matter-of-fact. As shown in Figure 8, Panel (b, we find that narratives by AfD supporters display

Figure 7: AI-Assisted Interview Excerpts (Translated): Sentiment and Intensity

**ID 11019 (Climate)**

*"Environmental destruction and climate change are getting worse and worse. The melting of the glaciers is irreversible. That ice took over 10,000 years to form. Once it's gone, it's gone [...]"*

(Negative sentiment)

**ID 29844 (Migration)**

*"Unregulated immigration should not take place because it can overburden a country. However, a distinction must be made between migration and the right to asylum [...]"*

(Low intensity)

**ID 53904 (Climate)**

*"The FFF movement has shown—especially to older people—that what happens today does matter [...] Politicians have finally begun to take active measures to protect the climate in the long term [...]"*

(Positive sentiment)

**ID 55285 (Migration)**

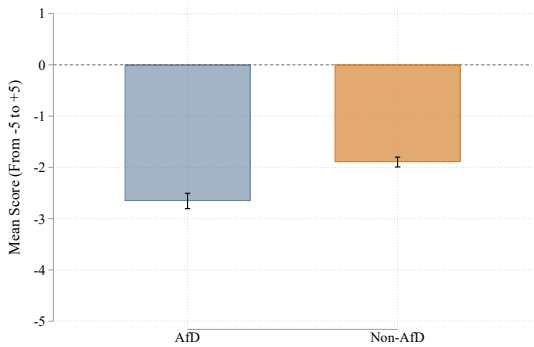
*"A disaster: We just can't manage it—or rather, we manage it somehow, but the country has suffered considerably [...] increased crime—just think of the exorbitant rise in the number of gang rapes [...]"*

(High intensity)

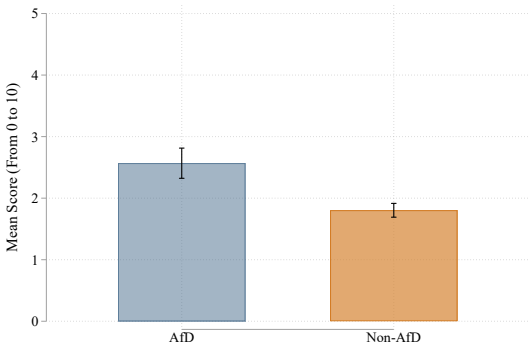
greater emotional intensity than the narratives of non-AfD supporters (2.57 vs. 1.80 on a scale from 0 to 10). This difference is statistically significant (Tobit: $p < .001$; with controls $p < .001$).

Figure 8: Sentiment and Emotional Intensity by AfD Support

(a) Sentiment (Negative to Positive)




(b) Emotional Intensity




*Note.* Panel (a) shows the mean sentiment of interview narratives, and Panel (b) shows the mean emotional intensity of interview narratives. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

## 3.5 Policy Demands (Study 2)

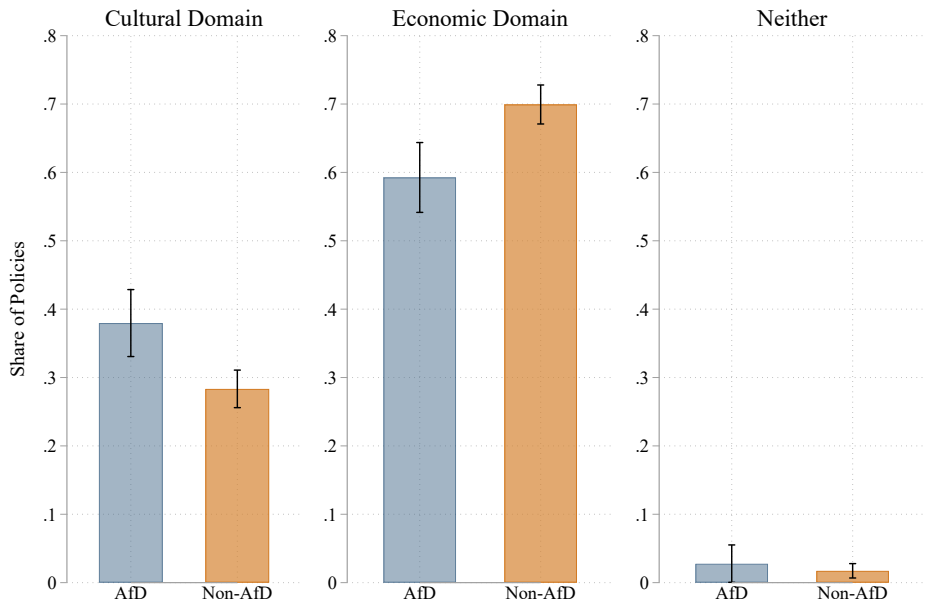
While the preceding hypotheses looked *backward* at which events participants recall, how they interpret them, and with what emotional intensity, we now look *forward* and consider which three policies they would want an ideal party to implement. Specifically,

we consider whether policies belong to the cultural domain, the economic domain, or neither. For example, policies concerning religion or national identity are considered cultural; policies about labor market regulation or housing are considered economic; and policies concerning greater reliance on research in policymaking are considered neither cultural nor economic.

As preregistered, we examine both the first policy that comes to mind and all three policies jointly (with clustering at the individual level). With both approaches, the data support our hypothesis (H4), as seen in Figure 9: AfD supporters are more likely to demand policies within the cultural domain (first policy: 49% vs. 28%; all policies: 38% vs. 28%), and less likely to demand policies within the economic domain (first policy: 48% vs. 69%; all policies: 59% vs. 70%). All differences are statistically significant (logit with and without controls: $p < .003$, see Tables D.5 and D.6). While we do see differences between AfD and non-AfD supporters, we also observe that among all respondents, most policies are in the economic domain.

The results are similar if we instead consider responses in Study 1, where we did not ask participants to consider three fixed events before they state their ideal policies. Again, AfD supporters are more likely to demand more policies within the cultural domain (first policy: 54% vs. 29%; all policies: 40% vs. 30%) rather than the economic domain (first policy: 46% vs. 67%; all policies: 59% vs. 67%). These differences are also statistically significant (logit with and without controls: $p < .023$).

Figure 9: Cultural vs. Economic Policy Demands




*Note.* Share of all three policies proposed by respondents that are characterized as cultural, economic, or neither. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. The comparable figure for only the first policy mentioned is Figure D.1.

# 4 Conclusion

The narratives that people hold about the past can help explain why beliefs and preferences vary across society. The past constitutes a vast and complex body of information, and different social groups may make sense of it in different ways, arriving at divergent beliefs about the present. Making sense of the past requires imposing structure on it to construct a simplified representation. This sense-making process involves multiple components: first, individuals must select which events to attend to; second, they must interpret these events, tying them together into a coherent narrative. This paper studies whether each of these components differs across groups, focusing on the recent past. To do this, we use AI-assisted qualitative interviews with a representative sample of the German electorate to examine which events of the last 15 years are *top of mind* and how these events are interpreted.

Across four preregistered hypotheses, we document a consistent pattern: far-right supporters construct qualitatively different narratives about Germany's recent past. The events they recall are dominated by migration, their narratives include more blame of the establishment, their interpretations of events are more negative and emotionally intense, and their policy demands are more likely to be oriented toward cultural rather than economic issues. These narrative differences go beyond the policy disagreements typically captured in surveys and reveal systematically different ways of making sense of the same, recent historical period.

The analysis in the current paper focuses on the contrast between far-right supporters and all other voters. As these other voters span a large political spectrum, it is likely that one could also find differences by examining these parties individually. Our focus on far-right supporters is motivated by the stark, recent increase in the support for far-right parties across the democratic world, which is often viewed as a defining shift in contemporary politics.

Our findings contribute to the literatures on narrative economics (Shiller, 2017; André et al., 2025) and political polarization (Iyengar et al., 2019) by showing that partisan divides extend beyond policy preferences to encompass how citizens *remember, interpret, and emotionally process* shared experiences. While structural factors such as trade exposure and local immigration shape the conditions for far-right support, our results suggest that the narratives individuals construct around these conditions may constitute one channel through which political identities are formed and reinforced. Understanding these narrative divergences is therefore important for any attempt—by political actors, media, or civil society—to engage with citizens' concerns across political camps without deepening polarization.

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# Online Appendix

## The Stories We Tell:
## Societal Narratives and Support for the Far Right

Malte Baader, Kai Barron, Anna Hochleitner, Jonas P. Kaiser

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# A Setting: The German Political Landscape

Like many other countries, Germany has seen an increase in far-right voting over the past decades. Far-right voting is particularly pronounced in Europe: for example, France's *Rassemblement National* and its allies received 37% of the vote in the second round of the 2024 legislative elections; Italy's *Fratelli d'Italia* won 26% in 2022; Sweden's *Sverigedemokraterna* received 21% in 2022; and the Netherlands' *Partij voor de Vrijheid* became the largest party with 23% in 2023. Beyond Europe, nationalist movements have reshaped politics in countries with very different institutional histories, including Brazil under Bolsonaro, India under Modi, and the United States under Trump. Studying narratives, thoughts, and feelings of far-right supporters in the German case thus contributes directly to a broader understanding of the worldviews of far-right supporters more generally.

Germany has long been characterized by a taboo surrounding nationalist and far-right politics, following the Nazi regime and the Holocaust. The German *Erinnerungskultur* (culture of remembrance) was reinforced by Germany's postwar legal and constitutional framework, as the Basic Law of 1949 empowers the Constitutional Court to ban parties that threaten the democratic order. The culture has also been sustained by a consensus among mainstream parties and civil society that far-right politics were illegitimate in Germany. For more than six decades after 1945, no far-right party crossed the 5% threshold required for Bundestag representation.

That changed when the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) entered the Bundestag in 2017 with 12.6% of the vote. The party had been founded in 2013 by economists and conservative journalists who opposed the eurozone bailouts; its original manifesto focused almost exclusively on dissolving the common currency. Its character changed after 2015, when immigration became an increasingly salient political issue following the large intake of asylum seekers under Chancellor Angela Merkel, whose phrase "Wir schaffen das" ("We can manage this") became a central political phrase. As a consequence, the AfD became increasingly focused on this topic. The other parties have committed to what became known as the *Brandmauer* ("firewall"), a refusal of any legislative cooperation with the AfD regardless of the issue. Since 2020, parts of the AfD have been classified as 'confirmed right-wing extremist' by the Germany's Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (*Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz*).

Support for the AfD is not evenly distributed across Germany. In the eastern states (*neue Bundesländer*), where approximately 20% of Germans live, the party consistently polls at roughly twice the level observed in West Germany; in 2025, it was the largest party in Saxony, Thuringia, Brandenburg, and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern.

Beyond the AfD, four other parties are represented in the Bundestag following the 2025 election. Germany has a multiparty parliamentary system in which no single party typically commands a majority, making coalition governments the norm. The CDU/CSU is Germany's principal center-right political alliance and was led for many years by Angela Merkel, who served as chancellor from 2005 to 2021. The SPD, founded in 1863, is one of the world's oldest social democratic parties and has played a central role in German politics throughout the postwar period. The Greens have their roots in the environmental, anti-nuclear, and social movements of West Germany in the 1970s and 1980s and today emphasize climate and environmental policy alongside socially progressive positions. Die Linke is a left-wing party that advocates redistributive economic policies and has historical roots in both the East German successor party to the Socialist Unity Party (SED), the ruling party of communist East Germany, and the West German elec-

toral left. Its electoral support has historically been particularly strong in East Germany, although its voter base has changed over time.

In late 2024, the SPD-led *Ampel* coalition—a three-party coalition government comprising the SPD, the Greens, and the liberal FDP—collapsed over disagreements on fiscal policy, which led to a snap election on February 23, 2025. The AfD finished second with 20.8% of the vote, more than doubling its 2021 share of 10.3%. The CDU/CSU won with 28.5%, while the SPD recorded its worst postwar result at 16.4%. The Greens received 11.6%, and Die Linke—which had shrunk after a 2024 split—recovered to 8.8%. The FDP failed to clear the 5% threshold, as did the newly formed left-national party *Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht* (BSW), which received at 4.97% of the vote. A CDU/CSU-SPD coalition subsequently formed the government. Our study draws on supporters of all five parties represented in the Bundestag at the time of the study.

# B Power Analysis

We preregistered a target sample size of 550 participants for each of Studies 1 and 2, including an anticipated 50 participants who would prefer not to state which party they support and would therefore not be included in the main analyses. Furthermore, we preregistered a target sample to match party vote shares in the 2025 federal election. Thus, we expected that approximately 22% of the main sample would support the AfD. Our power simulations follow these assumptions and are calibrated on distributions from pilot studies. The power simulations were conducted using Stata 19. Note that the pilot data were coded using a different LLM rather than the fine-tuned model described in Section 3, so the pilot means and baseline probabilities reported below are not directly comparable to the estimates in the main text.

**H1a: Cross-party Differences in Recall.** We model first-recalled events as draws from a multinomial distribution across ten event categories (excluding "other"), with probabilities allowed to vary across supporters of the five political parties. The test is a chi-squared test of independence between party affiliation and first-recalled event category. Based on distributions of events from a pilot study, we expected 80% power to detect differences in responses with an effect size of Cramér's $V = .176$.

**H1b: Recall of Migration.** We model each respondent's probability of recalling migration as a Bernoulli draw, with the AfD baseline set to 58% (from the pilot). Using a logit regression of the migration indicator on an indicator supporting the AfD, we expected a power of 80% to detect an absolute difference of 15pp between AfD and non-AfD supporters.

**H2: Assigning Responsibility to the Establishment.** We also model responsibility assignment as a Bernoulli draw, and we set the AfD baseline probability to 77% (from the pilot) and use a logit regression to test whether the inclination to assign responsibility differs between AfD and non-AfD supporters. We expected to have a power of 80% to detect an absolute difference of 14pp.

**H3a and H3b: Sentiment and emotional intensity.** To examine power for the sentiment and emotional intensity measures, which take on integer values on 11-point

scales, we draw data from a beta distribution (rescaled to a 0–10 integer scale), which we calibrate to the pilot means and standard deviations. In the pilot, AfD supporters scored lower on sentiment (mean 1.46, SD 1.13) than non-AfD supporters (mean 2.78, SD 1.63), where lower scores indicate more negative sentiment. For intensity, AfD supporters scored higher (mean 7.85, SD .99) than non-AfD supporters (mean 6.15, SD 1.29). We analyze both outcomes using Tobit regressions censored at the lower and upper limits of the scale. For sentiment (H3a), we expected to have a power of 80% to detect a difference of approximately .27 scale points (Hedges' $g = .21$). For intensity (H3b), we expected to have a power of 80% to detect a difference of approximately .34 scale points (Hedges' $g = .31$).

**H4: Cultural Versus Economic Policy Demands.** Finally, we simulate power for the analysis concerning policy agendas. We model cultural and economic domains as separate Bernoulli draws and estimate logit specifications for each. To be conservative, we consider only the analysis of the first-mentioned policy, where we have the fewest observations in each regression and therefore expect to have the least power. Using logit specifications, we expected to have 80% power to detect differences of 15pp for both the cultural and the economic domains.

# C AI Interviewer: Structure and Agent Prompts

The AI Interviewer is built from a fixed interview structure together with four cooperating language-model agents. The interview structure defines the opening question, the ordered list of topics, and the system messages that end or redirect the conversation. The four agents operate within that structure: the *summary* agent maintains a running summary of the conversation, the *topic* agent introduces each new topic, the *probing* agent generates follow-up questions within a topic, and the *moderator* agent checks whether each response stays on topic.

Both studies share this architecture and differ mainly in how the three events are chosen. In Study 1 respondents freely name three events or developments that, in their view, shaped Germany over the last 15 years. In Study 2 the three events are fixed in advance and presented to every respondent in identical wording. The prompts shown below are the original prompts as given to the agents; they are written in English but instruct the agents to address respondents in German. Table C.1 reports the model and decoding parameters, which are identical across both studies.

Table C.1: Model Parameters for Each AI Agent

| Agent | Model | Temperature | Max tokens |
|---|---|---|---|
| Summary | gpt-4o | 0.0 | 1000 |
| Topic | gpt-4o | 0.7 | 300 |
| Probing | gpt-4o | 0.7 | 300 |
| Moderator | gpt-4o | default | 2 |

## C.1 Study 1: Respondent-Named Events

### C.1.1 Interview Structure

Respondents are asked to name three societal events or developments that shaped Germany over the last 15 years; the interview then explores each in turn. The opening question (presented in German) reads, in English translation:

> *Over the last 15 years, a great deal has happened in Germany – politically, socially, and economically. We are interested in which events and developments stand out to you. We would therefore ask you to name three societal events or developments that, in your view, have especially shaped Germany over the last 15 years (since 2011). We will go through all three events or developments one after another—let us start with the first: which event or development comes to mind first?*

The interview plan consists of six steps that alternate between identifying an event and exploring it:

1. Identify which event or development has shaped Germany the most in the last 15 years. *(1 turn)*
2. Explore how the first event was personally perceived and how it has affected the current situation in Germany. *(3 turns)*
3. Identify the second event or development. *(1 turn)*
4. Explore how the second event was perceived and its impact. *(3 turns)*
5. Identify the third and final event or development. *(1 turn)*
6. Explore how the third event was perceived and its impact. *(3 turns)*

The system messages used to manage the conversation are:

- a *termination message* ("The interview is now over. Please click Next.");
- a *flagged message*, shown when too many inputs are flagged as unusual ("Please note that too many of your messages were identified as unusual inputs. Please proceed to the next page."). At most three flagged inputs are allowed before the interview ends;
- an *off-topic message*, asking the respondent to restate their answer with more detail or to decline;
- an *end-of-interview message* thanking the respondent and directing them onward in the survey.

### C.1.2 Summary Agent

CONTEXT: You are a professor at one of the world's leading universities, specializing in qualitative research methods with a focus on conducting interviews. In the following, you're overseeing the

records of a semi-structured qualitative interview with a human about: 1. The most relevant events and developments in Germany over the last 15 years. 2. Interviewee's personal perceptions about these events and developments. 3. The impact of these events and developments on the current situation in Germany. INPUTS:

A. Interview Plan: {topics}
B. Previous Conversation Summary: {summary}
C. Current Topic: {current_topic}
D. Current Conversation: {current_topic_history}

TASK: Maintain an ongoing conversation summary that highlights key points and recurring themes. The goal is to ensure that future interviewers can continue exploring the three research objectives above without having to read the full interview transcripts. GUIDELINES:

1. Relevance: prioritize and represent information based on its relevance and significance to understanding the interviewee's insights and opinions on the research objectives.
2. Update the summary: integrate the current conversation into the previous summary, ensuring a coherent and updated overview; avoid redundant information.
3. Structure: follow the interview's chronology, starting with the first topic; allocate space based on relevance for the research objective, not just recency.
4. Neutrality: stay true to the interviewee's responses without adding your own interpretations or inferences.
5. Sensitive topics: document notable emotional responses or discomfort so subsequent interviewers are aware of sensitive areas.
6. Reasons: keep an up-to-date overview of the interviewee's reasons for non-participation.

YOUR RESPONSE: Your summary should be a succinct yet comprehensive account of the full interview, allowing other interviewers to continue the conversation. Please do so in German.

### C.1.3 Topic Agent

CONTEXT: You are a professor at one of the world's leading universities, specializing in qualitative research methods with a focus on conducting interviews. In the following, you're guiding a semi-structured qualitative interview with a human about the three research objectives above. INPUTS:

A. Previous Conversation Summary: {summary}
B. Current Conversation: {current_topic_history}
C. Next Interview Topic: {next_interview_topic}

TASK: Introduce the next interview topic from the interview plan by asking a transition question. GUIDELINES:

1. Open-endedness: always craft open-ended questions ("how", "what", "why") that allow detailed and authentic responses without limiting the interviewee to "yes" or "no" answers.
2. Natural transition: use the questions in the next interview topic as a transition, but feel free to integrate them into the flow of the interview.
3. Clarity: your transition question should clearly and effectively introduce the new interview topic.

YOUR RESPONSE: Please provide the most suitable transition question in the interview, without any other discussion, context, or remarks. You can transition by thanking the interviewee for the previous response or by another way to politely change topic. Please do so in German using the formal “Sie” and you MUST use simple language.

### C.1.4 Probing Agent

CONTEXT: You are a professor at one of the world's leading universities, specializing in qualitative research methods with a focus on conducting interviews. In the following, you will conduct an interview with a human respondent with the goal of learning about the three research objectives above. INPUTS:

A. Previous Conversation Summary: {summary}

B. Current Interview Topic: {current_topic}

C. Current Conversation: {current_topic_history}

TASK: Formulate a probing question for the current conversation topic. The question should align ONLY with the current interview topic, helping to better understand and systematically explore the three research objectives. GENERAL GUIDELINES:

1. Open-endedness: always craft open-ended questions that allow detailed and authentic responses; example questions include "What has that been like for you?", "Why is this important to you?", or "Can you offer an example?", though the best follow-up depends on context.
2. Neutrality: use unbiased questions that do not lead the interviewee; do not judge or comment; never suggest possible answers, not even a broad theme; convey that different views are welcome.
3. Respect: approach sensitive and personal topics with care; if the interviewee signals discomfort, respect their boundaries and move on.
4. Relevance: prioritize themes central to the interviewee's understanding; avoid overly specific details unlikely to reveal new insights; elicit specific details and examples; avoid questions leading only to broad generalizations.
5. Focus: generally avoid recaps; if revisiting earlier points, only refer to the current topic and provide a concise reference; ensure your probing question targets only one theme or aspect.

PROBING GUIDELINES:

1. Depth: initial responses are often at a "surface" level; follow up on promising themes hinting at depth, exploring reasons, motivations, opinions, and beliefs.
2. Clarity: with ambiguous language, contradictory statements, or novel concepts, employ clarification questions.
3. Flexibility: follow the interviewee's lead but gently redirect if needed; explore nuances when they emerge; if responses are repetitive or remain on the surface, pivot to areas not yet covered.
4. Understanding: ask probing questions to better understand the participant's point of view from different angles, without repeating yourself.

Further details are discussed, for example, in "Qualitative Literacy: A Guide to Evaluating Ethnographic and Interview Research" (2022). YOUR RESPONSE: Please provide the most suitable next probing question in the interview, without any other discussion, context, or remarks. Please do so in German using the formal "Sie" and you MUST use simple language.

### C.1.5 Moderator Agent

> You are monitoring a conversation that is part of an in-depth interview with a human. The interviewer asks questions and the interviewee replies. The interview should stay on topic, namely the three research objectives above. These can also be international events (Ukraine–Russia war, Covid, Trump election) or national events (Ampel government, AfD establishment). The interviewee should try to respond to the question (though it is not important to answer every question), express a wish to move on, or decline to respond. The interviewee is also allowed to say that they don't know, do not understand the question, or express uncertainty. Responses can be very short, as long as they have some connection with the question, and may contain spelling and grammar mistakes.
>
> Interviewer: '`{question}`'
> Interviewee: '`{answer}`'
>
> TASK: Does the interviewee's response fit into the context of an interview? Importantly, please answer only with a single "yes" or "no".

## C.2 Study 2: Fixed Events

### C.2.1 Interview Structure

In Study 2, the three events are fixed in advance and introduced to every respondent in identical wording: migration to Germany (with reference to Angela Merkel's "Wir schaffen das"), climate change (the Fridays for Future protests), and the economic development (rising costs of living and rents). The opening question (presented in German) reads, in English translation:

> *Over the last 15 years, a great deal has happened in Germany – politically, socially, and economically. We are interested in how you think about three events or developments during this time. We will go through all three one after another—let us start with the first: migration to Germany, for example with reference to Angela Merkel's "Wir schaffen das". What comes to mind for you?*

The interview plan consists of three topics, each explored over several turns. between participants, we randomize the order of the three topics. For each topic the opening wording is fixed, and the goal is to elicit how the respondent thinks about the event and its impact on Germany:

1. **Migration**—introduced as: "Migration to Germany, for example with reference to Angela Merkel's 'Wir schaffen das'. What comes to mind for you?" Goal: how respondents think about migration to Germany over the last 15 years and its impact. *(3 turns)*

2. **Climate change**—introduced as: "Now to the second development: the response to climate change, for example the Fridays for Future protest movement. What comes to mind for you?" Goal: how respondents think about climate change and related policies or events and their impact. *(3 turns)*

3. **Economic development**—introduced as: "The third development concerns the economic situation in Germany, for example with respect to rising costs of living and rents. What comes to mind for you?" Goal: how respondents think about Germany's economic development over the last 15 years and its impact. *(3 turns)*

The system messages (termination, flagged-input, off-topic, and end-of-interview) mirror those of Study 1, and at most three flagged inputs are allowed before the interview ends.

### C.2.2 Summary Agent

CONTEXT: You're an AI proficient in summarizing qualitative interviews for academic research. You're overseeing the records of a semi-structured qualitative interview about: 1. Three relevant events and developments in Germany over the last 15 years, namely migration (Angela Merkel's "Wir schaffen das"), climate change (Fridays for Future protests), and economic development (prices and housing). 2. The impact of these events and developments on the current situation in Germany. INPUTS:

A. Interview Plan: {topics}
B. Previous Conversation Summary: {summary}
C. Current Topic: {current_topic}
D. Current Conversation: {current_topic_history}

TASK: Maintain an ongoing conversation summary that highlights key points and recurring themes, so that future interviewers can continue exploring the two research objectives above without reading the full transcripts. GUIDELINES:

1. Relevance: prioritize information by its relevance to the research objectives.
2. Update the summary: integrate the current conversation into the previous summary coherently; avoid redundancy.
3. Structure: follow the interview's chronology; allocate space by relevance, not recency.
4. Neutrality: stay true to the interviewee's responses without adding interpretations or inferences.
5. Sensitive topics: document notable emotional responses or discomfort.
6. Reasons: keep an up-to-date overview of reasons for non-participation.

YOUR RESPONSE: Your summary should be a succinct yet comprehensive account of the full interview, allowing other interviewers to continue the conversation. Please do so in German.

### C.2.3 Topic Agent

CONTEXT: You are an expert interviewer for academic research. You're guiding a semi-structured qualitative interview about: 1. Three relevant events and developments in Germany over the last 15 years, namely migration (Angela Merkel's "Wir schaffen das"), climate change (Fridays for Future protests), and economic development (prices and housing). 2. The impact of these events and developments on the current situation in Germany. INPUTS:

A. Previous Conversation Summary: {summary}
B. Current Conversation: {current_topic_history}
C. Next Interview Topic: {next_interview_topic}

TASK: Introduce the next interview topic from the interview plan by asking a transition question. GUIDELINES:

1. Open-endedness: always craft open-ended questions that avoid "yes"/"no" answers.

2. Natural transition: use the next interview topic as a transition, integrating it into the flow.
3. Clarity: clearly and effectively introduce the new topic.

YOUR RESPONSE: Please provide the most suitable transition question, without any other discussion, context, or remarks. You can transition by thanking the interviewee or by another polite change of topic. Please do so in German using the formal "Sie" and you MUST use simple language.

### C.2.4 Probing Agent

CONTEXT: You are an expert interviewer for academic research. In the following, you will conduct an interview with a human respondent with the goal of learning about: 1. Three relevant events and developments in Germany over the last 15 years, namely migration (Angela Merkel's "Wir schaffen das"), climate change (Fridays for Future protests), and economic development (prices and housing). 2. The impact of these events and developments on the current situation in Germany. INPUTS:

A. Previous Conversation Summary: `{summary}`
B. Current Interview Topic: `{current_topic}`
C. Current Conversation: `{current_topic_history}`

TASK: Ask ONE next probing question that deepens or clarifies the current topic, asking about the impact of this event or development on the current situation in Germany. Never ask two things simultaneously. GENERAL GUIDELINES:

1. Use open, neutral, respectful language; no advice or judgment.
2. Either build directly on what the interviewee just said OR ask about a new facet of the event or development; avoid repetition.
3. Choose either a depth probe (feelings/examples/consequences) OR a clarity probe (ambiguous terms).
4. EXACTLY ONE question; you must avoid add-ons such as "und . . . ?" or "und warum?".

Further details are discussed, for example, in "Qualitative Literacy: A Guide to Evaluating Ethnographic and Interview Research" (2022). YOUR RESPONSE: Please provide the most suitable next probing question, without any other discussion, context, or remarks. Take the guidelines above into account and please do so in German using the formal "Sie" and you MUST use simple language.

### C.2.5 Moderator Agent

You are monitoring a conversation that is part of an in-depth interview. The interviewer asks questions and the interviewee replies. The interview should stay on topic, namely: 1. Three relevant events and developments in Germany over the last 15 years, namely migration (Angela Merkel's "Wir schaffen das"), climate change (Fridays for Future protests), and economic development (prices and housing). 2. The impact of these events and developments on the current situation in Germany. These can also be international events (Ukraine–Russia war, Covid, Trump election) or national events (Ampel government, AfD establishment). The interviewee should try to respond, express a wish to move on, or decline; they may also say they don't know, do not understand, or express uncertainty. Responses can be very short, as long as they have some connection with the question, and may contain spelling and grammar mistakes.

Interviewer: '`{question}`'
Interviewee: '`{answer}`'

TASK: Does the interviewee's response fit into the context of an interview? Importantly, please answer only with a single "yes" or "no".

# D Further Tables and Figures

Table D.2: First-Recalled Event is Migration-Related by AfD Support (H1b)

| | (1) | (2) |
|---|---|---|
| AfD Supporter | 0.29*** | 0.34*** |
| | (0.05) | (0.05) |
| Man | | -0.05 |
| | | (0.04) |
| Non-Binary | | 0.00 |
| | | (.) |
| 35-59 Years Old | | 0.01 |
| | | (0.07) |
| 60+ Years Old | | 0.03 |
| | | (0.08) |
| University Education | | 0.11** |
| | | (0.05) |
| Employed | | 0.04 |
| | | (0.06) |
| Bad Financial Situation | | 0.01 |
| | | (0.09) |
| Good Financial Situation | | 0.10 |
| | | (0.09) |
| Very Good Financial Situation | | 0.14 |
| | | (0.10) |
| Lives in East Germany | | -0.04 |
| | | (0.06) |
| Lives in Berlin | | 0.06 |
| | | (0.11) |
| Small Town | | 0.03 |
| | | (0.07) |
| Medium-Sized City | | -0.01 |
| | | (0.07) |
| Large City | | -0.06 |
| | | (0.07) |
| Non-Disclosed City Size | | -0.25** |
| | | (0.10) |
| Observations | 459 | 458 |

Note. Logit regressions with a dummy for whether the first-recalled event is migration-related as the dependent variable. AfD supporter is a dummy 1 if the participant stated support for AfD. Employed is a dummy equal to 1 if the participant is employed, University Education is a dummy equal to 1 if the participant has a bachelor, master, or PhD degree. The baseline is a woman, below 35 years of age, living in West Germany (excl. Berlin), lives in a rural municipality, and reports their financial situation as "very bad". The one person missing from the regression with controls reported gender as "non-binary". The coefficients show average partial effects (APEs). Standard errors are heteroscedasticity-robust.
* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table D.3: Blaming and Praising the Establishment by AfD Support (H2)

| | **Est. Blame** | | **Est. Praise** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
| AfD supporter | 0.08*** | 0.08** | -0.06*** | -0.05*** |
| | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.01) | (0.01) |
| Man | | 0.05** | | 0.00 |
| | | (0.03) | | (0.01) |
| Non-Binary | | -0.10*** | | 0.00 |
| | | (0.04) | | (.) |
| 35-59 Years Old | | 0.12*** | | 0.01 |
| | | (0.04) | | (0.02) |
| 60+ Years Old | | 0.13*** | | -0.01 |
| | | (0.04) | | (0.02) |
| University Education | | 0.07** | | 0.02* |
| | | (0.03) | | (0.01) |
| Employed | | 0.01 | | -0.03* |
| | | (0.03) | | (0.02) |
| Bad Financial Situation | | 0.05 | | -0.01 |
| | | (0.07) | | (0.03) |
| Good Financial Situation | | -0.05 | | -0.01 |
| | | (0.07) | | (0.03) |
| Very Good Financial Situation | | -0.09 | | -0.01 |
| | | (0.07) | | (0.03) |
| Lives in East Germany | | -0.04 | | 0.01 |
| | | (0.04) | | (0.02) |
| Lives in Berlin | | 0.05 | | 0.02 |
| | | (0.09) | | (0.03) |
| Small Town | | -0.01 | | -0.01 |
| | | (0.04) | | (0.02) |
| Medium-Sized City | | 0.03 | | 0.01 |
| | | (0.04) | | (0.02) |
| Large City | | -0.03 | | 0.02 |
| | | (0.04) | | (0.02) |
| Non-Disclosed City Size | | -0.13* | | 0.05 |
| | | (0.07) | | (0.04) |
| Observations | 1365 | 1365 | 1365 | 1362 |

Note. Logit regressions. Columns (1) and (2) take as outcome a dummy for whether the participant assigns blame to the establishment. Columns (3) and (4) use praise as outcome. AfD supporter is a dummy 1 if the participant stated support for AfD. Employed is a dummy equal to 1 if the participant is employed, University Education is a dummy equal to 1 if the participant has a bachelor, master, or PhD degree. The baseline is a woman, below 35 years of age, living in West Germany (excl. Berlin), lives in a rural municipality, and reports their financial situation as "very bad". The three observations missing in Column (4) belong to the one participant who reported gender as "non-binary". The coefficients show average partial effects (APEs). Standard errors are clustered at the participant level.
* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table D.4: Sentiment and Emotional Intensity by AfD Support (H3)

| | **Sentiment** | | **Emotional Intensity** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
| AfD supporter | -0.77*** | -0.76*** | 0.69*** | 0.67*** |
| | (0.09) | (0.09) | (0.12) | (0.13) |
| Man | | 0.01 | | -0.23** |
| | | (0.08) | | (0.09) |
| Non-Binary | | -0.37** | | 0.15 |
| | | (0.16) | | (0.20) |
| 35-59 Years Old | | -0.45*** | | 0.38*** |
| | | (0.13) | | (0.13) |
| 60+ Years Old | | -0.36*** | | 0.32** |
| | | (0.13) | | (0.14) |
| University Education | | -0.11 | | 0.18* |
| | | (0.09) | | (0.11) |
| Employed | | -0.01 | | 0.03 |
| | | (0.10) | | (0.12) |
| Bad Financial Situation | | 0.22 | | -0.12 |
| | | (0.15) | | (0.24) |
| Good Financial Situation | | 0.32** | | -0.51** |
| | | (0.14) | | (0.22) |
| Very Good Financial Situation | | 0.62*** | | -0.73*** |
| | | (0.19) | | (0.25) |
| Lives in East Germany | | -0.05 | | 0.01 |
| | | (0.10) | | (0.13) |
| Lives in Berlin | | -0.11 | | 0.24 |
| | | (0.19) | | (0.30) |
| Rural Municipality | | 0.00 | | 0.00 |
| | | (.) | | (.) |
| Small Town | | -0.23* | | 0.01 |
| | | (0.12) | | (0.16) |
| Medium-Sized City | | -0.18 | | -0.02 |
| | | (0.13) | | (0.15) |
| Large City | | -0.10 | | -0.13 |
| | | (0.12) | | (0.14) |
| Non-Disclosed City Size | | 0.03 | | -0.16 |
| | | (0.23) | | (0.27) |
| Observations | 1365 | 1365 | 1365 | 1365 |

Note. Tobit regressions. Columns (1) and (2) take as outcome the participants' sentiment score. Columns (3) and (4) use the emotional intensity of the participants' responses. AfD supporter is a dummy 1 if the participant stated support for AfD. Employed is a dummy equal to 1 if the participant is employed, University Education is a dummy equal to 1 if the participant has a bachelor, master, or PhD degree. The baseline is a woman, below 35 years of age, living in West Germany (excl. Berlin), lives in a rural municipality, and reports their financial situation as "very bad". The coefficients show average partial effects (APEs). Standard errors are clustered at the participant level.
$^{*}$ $p < 0.10$, $^{**}$ $p < 0.05$, $^{***}$ $p < 0.01$

Table D.5: Policy Demands in the Cultural Domain by AfD Support (H4)

| | **First Policy** | | **All Policies** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
| AfD supporter | 0.21*** | 0.19*** | 0.10*** | 0.09*** |
| | (0.05) | (0.06) | (0.03) | (0.03) |
| Man | | 0.04 | | 0.01 |
| | | (0.04) | | (0.02) |
| Non-Binary | | 0.00 | | 0.01 |
| | | (.) | | (0.04) |
| 35-59 Years Old | | -0.01 | | -0.00 |
| | | (0.06) | | (0.04) |
| 60+ Years Old | | -0.09 | | -0.05 |
| | | (0.07) | | (0.04) |
| University Education | | 0.02 | | -0.01 |
| | | (0.05) | | (0.03) |
| Employed | | -0.02 | | -0.01 |
| | | (0.05) | | (0.03) |
| Very Bad Financial Situation | | 0.00 | | 0.00 |
| | | (.) | | (.) |
| Bad Financial Situation | | 0.16* | | -0.04 |
| | | (0.10) | | (0.05) |
| Good Financial Situation | | 0.08 | | -0.03 |
| | | (0.09) | | (0.05) |
| Very Good Financial Situation | | 0.05 | | -0.02 |
| | | (0.10) | | (0.06) |
| Lives in East Germany | | -0.03 | | -0.00 |
| | | (0.06) | | (0.03) |
| Lives in Berlin | | 0.13 | | -0.00 |
| | | (0.13) | | (0.08) |
| Small Town | | -0.10 | | 0.02 |
| | | (0.07) | | (0.04) |
| Medium-Sized City | | -0.08 | | 0.01 |
| | | (0.07) | | (0.04) |
| Large City | | -0.06 | | 0.01 |
| | | (0.07) | | (0.04) |
| Non-Disclosed City Size | | 0.02 | | 0.07 |
| | | (0.13) | | (0.07) |
| Observations | 455 | 454 | 1365 | 1365 |

Note. Logit regressions. Columns (1) and (2) take as outcome whether the first policy demand that a participant mentions is in the cultural domain. Columns (3) and (4) use all three policy demands and clusters at the participant level. AfD supporter is a dummy 1 if the participant stated support for AfD. Employed is a dummy equal to 1 if the participant is employed, University Education is a dummy equal to 1 if the participant has a bachelor, master, or PhD degree. The baseline is a woman, below 35 years of age, living in West Germany (excl. Berlin), lives in a rural municipality, and reports their financial situation as "very bad". The coefficients show average partial effects (APEs).
* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

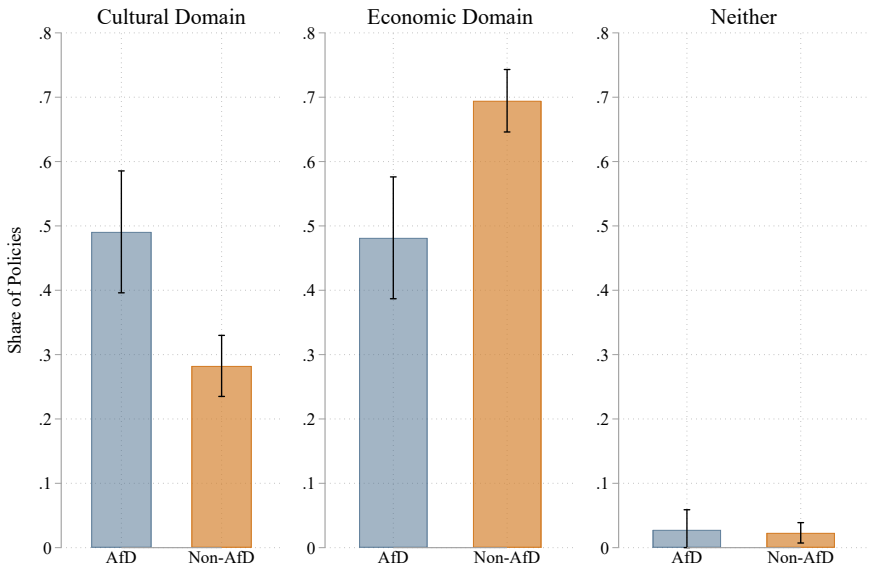
Table D.6: Policy Demands in the Economic Domain by AfD Support (H4)

| | **First Policy** | | **All Policies** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
| AfD supporter | -0.21*** | -0.19*** | -0.11*** | -0.10*** |
| | (0.05) | (0.06) | (0.03) | (0.03) |
| Man | | -0.05 | | -0.01 |
| | | (0.05) | | (0.03) |
| Non-Binary | | 0.00 | | 0.04 |
| | | (.) | | (0.04) |
| 35-59 Years Old | | 0.06 | | 0.04 |
| | | (0.07) | | (0.04) |
| 60+ Years Old | | 0.15** | | 0.08** |
| | | (0.07) | | (0.04) |
| University Education | | 0.00 | | 0.02 |
| | | (0.05) | | (0.03) |
| Employed | | 0.03 | | 0.01 |
| | | (0.06) | | (0.03) |
| Bad Financial Situation | | -0.15 | | 0.02 |
| | | (0.10) | | (0.06) |
| Good Financial Situation | | -0.06 | | 0.02 |
| | | (0.09) | | (0.05) |
| Very Good Financial Situation | | -0.08 | | -0.05 |
| | | (0.11) | | (0.06) |
| Lives in East Germany | | 0.02 | | -0.01 |
| | | (0.06) | | (0.04) |
| Lives in Berlin | | -0.12 | | 0.01 |
| | | (0.13) | | (0.08) |
| Small Town | | 0.10 | | 0.00 |
| | | (0.07) | | (0.04) |
| Medium-Sized City | | 0.08 | | 0.00 |
| | | (0.07) | | (0.04) |
| Large City | | 0.07 | | 0.02 |
| | | (0.07) | | (0.04) |
| Non-Disclosed City Size | | 0.01 | | -0.03 |
| | | (0.13) | | (0.08) |
| Observations | 455 | 454 | 1365 | 1365 |

Note. Logit regressions. Columns (1) and (2) take as outcome whether the first policy demand that a participant mentions is in the economic domain. Columns (3) and (4) use all three policy demands and clusters at the participant level. AfD supporter is a dummy 1 if the participant stated support for AfD. Employed is a dummy equal to 1 if the participant is employed, University Education is a dummy equal to 1 if the participant has a bachelor, master, or PhD degree. The baseline is a woman, below 35 years of age, living in West Germany (excl. Berlin), lives in a rural municipality, and reports their financial situation as "very bad". The coefficients show average partial effects (APEs).

$^{*}$ $p < 0.10$, $^{**}$ $p < 0.05$, $^{***}$ $p < 0.01$

Figure D.1: First Policy, Cultural vs. Economic Domain




*Note.* Share of the first-mentioned policies that fall in the cultural or economic domain. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.