Age and place: Urban-rural conflict along the age gradient

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Abstract

Two main developments of the 2021 German Federal Election were the increasing variation in voting behavior between both age groups and geographic groups. This paper brings these developments together and argues that the urban-rural divide is much bigger among younger voters than among older voters. This concerns cosmopolitan attitudes as well as the perception of conflict between city and countryside. Therefore, the strength of the Green party among young voters is mainly a strength among young urbanites. Among young rural voters, by contrast, the AfD received a surprisingly high share of support, particularly in Eastern Germany. At the same time, the age gradient is greater in cities than in the countryside: While the attitudes of younger city-dwellers differ strongly from those of their older neighbors, this age difference is significantly smaller in rural areas.

We explore this pattern with survey data from the German Longitudinal Election Study and supplement it with original survey data on political attitudes and perceptions of differences. Moreover, we introduce an innovative measure of the urban-rural divide, using the number of artists per district to measure urbanity. The analysis of our original survey data allows us to break urbanity down to the ZIP-code level.

We conclude that the urban-rural divide in Germany is more distinct among younger voters than among older voters. Therefore, we expect that the relevance and visibility of the urban-rural divide will likely further increase in forthcoming elections.

Introduction

When comparing the federal election of 2021 with earlier German elections, two patterns stand out as specific features of this election: a uniquely steep age gradient and a uniquely strong urban-rural divide in voting behavior. Both patterns have received a lot of attention in early analyses of the election results (for age, see John (2021), Bundeswahlleiter (2022), for geography, see Klärner and Osigus (2021), Haffert (2022)). However, both patterns have so far mainly been treated in isolation from each other. In this paper, we combine the two and argue that they are intimately linked.

The role of age was one of the defining features of the 2021 election. While young voters broke in record numbers for the Greens and the liberal FDP, the unexpected triumph of the SPD was founded on its strength among older voters. According to the Repräsentative Wahlstatistik (Bundeswahlleiter 2022), CDU/CSU and SPD, the traditional mainstream parties, had a combined vote share of more than 70% among voters over 70, while their combined vote share was less than 30% among voters under 34. Conversely, the Greens won less than 10% among older voters but more than 20% among the younger age groups.

With regard to geography, the election showed an unprecedented geographic polarization between the Greens and the AfD. While the Greens won 15 of the most urban electoral districts, the AfD's losses compared to 2017 were concentrated in the most urban areas. At the same time, the AfD won 16 rural districts in the East German states of Saxony, Saxony -Anhalt, and Thuringia. By contrast, the Greens often won less than 5% of the vote in these districts.

While both patterns have received a lot of attention, they have so far mainly been discussed in isolation. In this paper, however, we argue that they are intimately linked. Specifically, we argue that the urban success of the Greens is mainly driven by young urbanites, while the party is much weaker among young rural dwellers. Relatedly, the AfD's strength in rural areas is not confined to older voters but extends also to younger rural voters. As a consequence, the urban-rural divide in voting behavior is much more pronounced among younger voters than among older voters. This pattern is not restricted to voting behavior. The urban-rural gap in cosmopolitan attitudes, as well as the perception of urban-rural conflict, is also more pronounced among younger Germans.

This greater urban-rural split among younger voters can be traced to changes in the economy, cultural changes, and changes in the German party system. In terms of the economy, young urbanites are today fully integrated into a post-industrial knowledge economy, while rural dwellers typically still work in an environment dominated by an often export-focused industrial economy. By contrast, the economic context that today's pensioners experienced when they were in the labor market differed much less between urban and rural areas. In terms of culture, young urbanites are today the main representatives of a cosmopolitan lifestyle. Among the older generation, by contrast, life courses often followed a more similar, Fordist, pattern.

These economic and cultural differences have the potential to strongly affect voting behavior because of structural changes in the party system. In West Germany, the older generation was socialized into the traditional two-and-a-half party system of the old Federal Republic. As a result, many voters developed a deep attachment to either the Social Democrats or the Christian Democrats in their formative years. Younger voters, by contrast, were socialized into a much more fragmented party system which offered several viable options to them. In East Germany, younger and older voters are equally confronted with a party system that was imported from the West in 1990. At the same time, there was arguably an even smaller urban-rural divide in biographies and experiences before 1990 – and an even bigger divergence after 1990.

We thus argue that younger voters should show a greater urban-rural divide in their attitudes. Moreover, this greater attitudinal gap should also translate into greater differences in party preference and voting behavior. To provide evidence for these conjectures, we combine data on the propensity to vote from the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) with original survey data on political attitudes and conflict perception. Using this data, we show that the gap between urban and rural voters is much bigger among the younger cohorts. At the same time, the age gradient regarding the urban-rural divide appears to be greater in cities than in the countryside: While younger voters in cities differ strongly from their older neighbors, this age difference is significantly smaller in rural areas.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, we develop our argument why we expect urban-rural divides to be bigger among younger voters. Afterward, we explain our empirical approach and introduce the data that we use. In the empirical analysis, we then analyze cosmopolitan attitudes, the perception of social conflict, and voting propsensities. We conclude by discussing what our results mean for the future development of the urban-rural divide in Germany.

Argument

The urban-rural divide is increasingly at the center of attention when it comes to analyzing contemporary voting behavior in Western democracies. This divide is most prominent in Anglo-American countries, where it has been used to explain the success of Donald Trump and the Brexit campaign (Jennings and Stoker 2016, Rodríguez-Pose 2017, Gimpel, et al. 2020). However, it increasingly also dominates elections in continental European countries such as France, Switzerland, or Austria (Linder 2015, Emanuele 2017, Essletzbichler, et al. 2021). Moreover, a growing urban-rural divide has not just been observed in elections, but also concerning a range of "cosmopolitan" attitudes on issues such as immigration, European integration, and gender roles (Bergmann, et al. 2021, Huijsmans, et al. 2021, Kenny and Luca 2021, Luca, et al. 2022). Similar effects have also been found with regard to political trust (Lipps and Schraff 2020, Mitsch, et al. 2021) and even with regard to Covid vaccination (Bergmann et al 2021).

Germany had long been considered a country in which these divides play a minor role. With the rise of the AfD and the increasing success of the Greens, however, the urban-rural divide has also moved to the center of attention. The federal election of 2021 saw the highest level of urban-rural polarization at least since

reunification (Haffert 2022). Moreover, a growing number of substantive political issues, such as transport policy, housing policy, or energy policies, are increasingly discussed through an urban-rural lens.

The growing political importance of urban-rural divides is typically explained by a confluence of economic and cultural factors. Concerning the economy, the transformation to the knowledge economy heavily benefits urban areas due to its focus on innovation and knowledge spillovers, which are strongly facilitated by urban agglomeration effects (Moretti 2012, Dauth, et al. 2018, Iversen and Soskice 2019).

At the same time, the urban knowledge economy generates many jobs for workers with a university degree, in particular for socio-cultural professionals. These occupational groups are also characterized by strongly cosmopolitan cultural preferences and lifestyles (Florida 2002, Glaeser 2011, Oesch 2012, Kitschelt and Rehm 2014, Reckwitz 2017). Thus, while big cities have prospered in economic terms, they have also become increasingly cosmopolitan in recent years. This turned cities into the strongholds of green, new-left, and sometimes also liberal parties, while the feeling of being left behind both economically and culturally has fueled rural voters' turn towards the radical right.

In addition to urban-rural divides, age divides in the electorates have also received considerably more attention in recent years. Young people in Western societies show generally more progressive stances than older voters and emphasize the importance of issues tied to "new politics" (van der Brug and Rekker 2021, Wagner and Kritzinger 2012, Walczak et al. 2012). These effects, however, are not only due to individuals "getting older" and old people being less progressive, but most likely the expression of a cohort effect. More recent cohorts persistently indicate higher progressivity levels regarding morality, Europeanization, and gender equality (Rekker 2018, Lauterbach and De Vries 2020, McLaren and Paterson 2020). On the other hand, the evidence for immigration attitudes is mixed, pointing to a polarizing effect of immigration among more recent birth cohorts (McLaren and Paterson 2020, Lancaster 2022).

These age and cohort differences have also repeatedly been visible in voting behavior: In Germany, the success of the Greens has early on been linked to their high support among young voters. Repeatedly, it could be shown that the Green party gets over-proportional support among voters socialized after the 2000s but also among those who came of age in times of emerging environmental and peace movements in the 1980s (Goerres 2008, 2009, Rüdig 2012, Wagner, et al. 2012). These age differences are not exclusively located on the political left: Some findings point out that radical right parties fare electorally well among specific cohorts. Arzheimer and Berning (2019) could demonstrate that both the oldest and the youngest voters are less likely to vote for the AfD and that the party gets significantly more votes among voters in their 30s (see also Arzheimer (2016)). This might explain why other studies are not able to find a clear age pattern for the AfD who had been using a continuous age variable (e.g., Goerres 2019). In contrast, older German voters are still predominantly sticking to the "Volksparteien" SPD and CDU/CSU. The German 2021 elections saw these trends as strong as never before: The SPD and the CDU/CSU together got less than a quarter of the vote share among voters younger than 25. In the same elections, this is less than the Greens alone got among this age group. This development mirrors trends in other European countries, in

which formerly dominating parties from the center-left and center-right are increasingly turning into parties that get most of their support from pensioners (Lisi, et al. 2021, Van der Brug and Rekker 2021).
Attitudes and political behavior are thus increasingly structured by geographic and generational divides. We argue that these two developments are not unrelated but are, in fact, intimately linked. The same structural economic, and cultural processes that drive the increasing age gradient are also behind the growing urban-rural divide.

Three mechanisms let us expect a bigger urban-rural gap among the young than among the old. Firstly, the economic transformation to the knowledge economy had much stronger impacts on younger voters than on older voters. The economic experience of older voters, in particular pensioners, has still been dominated by the industrial economy with its relatively minor geographic differences. Hence, economic experiences in the older cohorts were stratified by class and income, but not so much by geography.

Among younger voters, by contrast, geography strongly affects economic experiences. While younger urban voters are heavily involved in the knowledge economy, younger rural voters often experience an economic context that is much less affected by this transformation.

Secondly, cultural experiences and attitudes were also much less geographically stratified over the life-course of older voters. Voters in both types of regions were socialized in a period that was dominated by a "Fordist", and "high modernist" lifestyle with relatively uniform biographies and attitudes (Reckwitz 2017). This is most strongly the case for voters who came of age before 1968, but even in the 1970s and 1980s cities had not become beacons of cosmopolitanism yet. As (Huijsmans, et al. 2021) show for the Netherlands, for example, urban and rural levels of ethnic intolerance only really started to diverge in the 1990s. Younger voters, by contrast, were socialized in a cultural context in which urban and rural contexts had become very different. Younger urban voters are the vanguard of the "EasyJet generation" that has a cosmopolitan lifestyle and cosmopolitan attitudes. These urbanities have more strongly been affected by "gradual and diffuse" societal transformation processes (Tiberj and Jacobs-Colas 2013). Urban areas thus function as drivers of social change that affects those voters most strongly that come of age in those regions. By contrast, younger voters in rural areas are much less distinct from their older neighbors in terms of their lifestyle and their attitudes.

Thirdly, differences in attitudes should translate much more directly into differences in electoral behavior among younger voters. The reason is that older voters are much more strongly tied to mainstream parties. They were politically socialized in a period when the SPD and the CDU/CSU still dominated German politics and had a strong organizational basis in trade unions and the churches respectively. Hence, many older voters developed a lifelong attachment to these parties and are unlikely to switch to new parties, even if their attitudes on individual issues change. Younger voters, by contrast, came of age in a period when the mainstream parties we already in decline and had lost many of their civil society foundations. Hence, younger voters were much more likely to develop a strong attachment to other parties – or no specific party at all. This makes it much more likely that attitudinal differences also translate into differences in vote choice.

Based on these arguments, we expect that attitudes and voting behavior are influenced by an interaction between age and residence:

H1: The urban-rural gap in attitudes and voting behavior is bigger among younger voters than among older voters.

In terms of voting behavior, the parties that are the main representatives of the urban-rural divide in the German party system are the Greens and the AfD. Hence, we formulate more specific sub-hypotheses for these two parties:

H1a: Young voters are more likely to vote for the Greens when they are living in urban areas

H1b: Young voters are more likely to vote for the AfD when they are living in rural areas.

However, we do not conceive of the growing polarization between younger "urbanites" and "ruralites" as symmetric. Instead, both major processes that drive this polarization are predominantly urban processes. The transformation to the knowledge economy is mainly an urban transformation. Of course, it also affects rural economies, but these effects are comparatively weaker. Similarly, the rise of cosmopolitan attitudes is primarily an urban development: The changing *Zeitgeist* is expected to play out more strongly in urban areas than in rural areas. This means that the differences between younger and older urban dwellers should be bigger than the differences between younger and older rural dwellers. We expect these bigger differences in terms of economic and cultural experiences to also translate into bigger differences in political attitudes and behavior.

H2: The age gradient in terms of attitudes and party preference is bigger in urban areas than in rural areas.

Empirical Design

Empirically, we rely on two sources of survey data. Firstly, data from the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) was collected around the election of 2021 and allows us to study the voting behavior of different age groups in different geographic contexts. Secondly, we use original survey data that was collected in the fall of 2020 (Bornschier, et al. 2021b), which allows us to look more closely at some mechanisms underpinning voting behavior. In particular, we use it to look at cosmopolitan attitudes and the perception of differences between urban and rural voters.

To measure urbanity, we introduce a new measure and use the number of freelance artists that are insured by the Künstlersozialkasse (KSK), the German social insurance fund for freelance artists. The KSK has about 200,000 members, including writers, freelance journalists, musicians, actors, and other artists. The number of insured artists is available at the ZIP-code level, which in principle allows us to measure the urbanity of a survey respondent's context at an extremely fine-grained level. Most ZIP-code districts have between 10,000 and 20,000 inhabitants. This recognizes the fact that the most urban and most rural areas

are the endpoints of a continuum, rather than representing a dichotomous division of the country (Nemerever and Rogers 2021).

Naturally, the number of artists in most ZIP-code districts is relatively small, often below 100, although some ZIP code districts in Berlin have more than 1000 artists. Hence, the artists themselves are only a very minor part of the district's population. However, they are a good proxy for the district's general level of urbanity. Districts with many artists are generally characterized by many indicators of urbanity: many owner-operated shops, a large variety of bars and cafes, cultural venues such as theaters and cinemas, dense public transport, and the like. Inhabitants of German cities will usually be able to easily guess the district with the highest number of artists.

The number of artists also correlates strongly with other measures of urbanity, such as population density. However, this correlation is not perfect and the KSK measure has two main advantages. Firstly, it is available at a more fine-grained level for the entire country. Secondly, when aggregated at the level of electoral districts, it better captures the context in which the majority of district inhabitants live. If a district contains a medium-sized city and its very rural surroundings, the majority of inhabitants can live in an urban context, even if the district's population density is very low. This is much better captured by the KSK-measure. A good example of this effect is the district Lüchow-Dannenberg – Lüneburg, which according to population density is one of the most rural districts in Western Germany, even if the majority of its inhabitants live in Lüneburg and its agglomeration.[1] In our analyses, we use urbanity in a logarithmic form to account for the right-skewed distribution of artist density.

We combine this measure of urbanity with several measures of people's attitudes and political behavior. Turning to behavior, we are interested in the indicated party preference: From the 2021 German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES), we take data on respondents' propensity to vote for different parties (from 0 to 10). Because we measure party preference in a continuous form, we calculate multivariate linear regression models including an interaction term for urbanity. Hence, we are not directly looking at voting behavior. Since we are interested in an interaction effect, using the propensity to vote allows us to do a more nuanced subgroup analysis as this maximizes our sample sizes.

Regarding attitudes and perceptions of political conflict, we use original survey data collected by a team at the University of Zurich (n=2073). This data is representative of the German population between the age of 18 and 74 with regard to age, gender, and education. Following the growing literature on urban-rural divides, we focus on a set of "cosmopolitan" attitudes towards immigration (Maxwell 2019, Huijsmans, et al. 2021, Kenny and Luca 2021), European integration (Huijsmans, et al. 2021), and gender equality (Luca, et al. 2022). To see whether respondents themselves are aware of these attitudinal differences, we also study their perception that urban and rural people differ in their values.

[1] Official typologies of urbanity, such as those provided by the Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung (BBSR), also deal with this problem. However, they are only available at the level of whole cities and do not allow to distinguish different degrees of urbanity within major cities such as Berlin, Hamburg, or Cologne.

Because we are only using data relying on one datapoint solely, we are not able to directly test cohort effects that might persist over time. However, to better assess age differences, we include age in every analysis as a categorical variable. The variable is split into four categories that should match different phases of an individual's life cycle: 16-34 years old (adolescence and early adulthood), 35-50 years old (mid-adulthood), 51-64 (senior adulthood), and 65 years and older (pension age). This also helps to detect the non-linear effects of age more precisely which might hint at potential socialization differences. We also run the linear regression models to analyze vote differences with a continuous age variable (see the appendix).

Results

Attitudes

We start with an analysis of respondents' attitudes. We investigate whether we find the predicted pattern of an age-dependent urban-rural divide among people's attitudes on "cosmopolitan" issues. To do so, we use our original survey data. Since this data contains the ZIP code of the respondent's home address, we can measure urbanity on this very fine-grained level.

We start with attitudes towards immigration and ask respondents whether they think that immigration is bad for the economy and whether immigration poses a threat to German culture. Respondents answered on a four-point scale from "Disagree strongly" (1) to "Agree strongly" (4). Figure 1 shows the results of regressions that regress these attitudes on the interaction between age group and urbanity, controlling for education, gender, migration background, and East/West residence. The figure shows the predicted values for members of the youngest and the oldest age groups.

As the graphs show, there is no urban-rural divide in the oldest age group. By contrast, younger urbanites have considerably more positive immigration attitudes than young people in rural areas, as predicted by hypothesis 1. Moreover, we also see support for hypothesis 2: While there is effectively no age gradient in rural areas, there is a substantial age gap in urban areas.

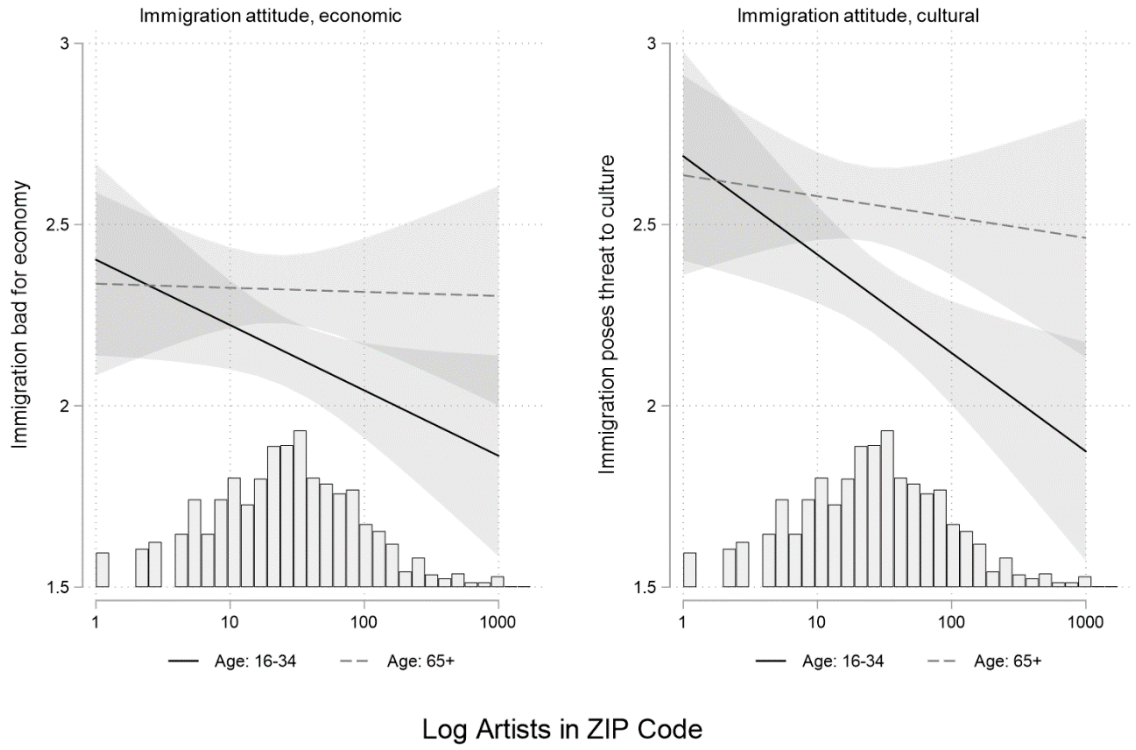


Figure 1: Immigration attitudes along age and residence

In Figure 2, we repeat the same analysis for attitudes toward European integration and gender equality. The question about European integration asked whether people agreed with the statement that "European integration has gone too far". The question about gender attitudes asked about the statement "All in all, family life suffers when the woman has a full-time job". For both questions, the results are similar to the results for immigration attitudes: No urban-rural gradient among the old, but a strong gradient among the young; no age divide in rural areas, but a strong age divide in urban areas.

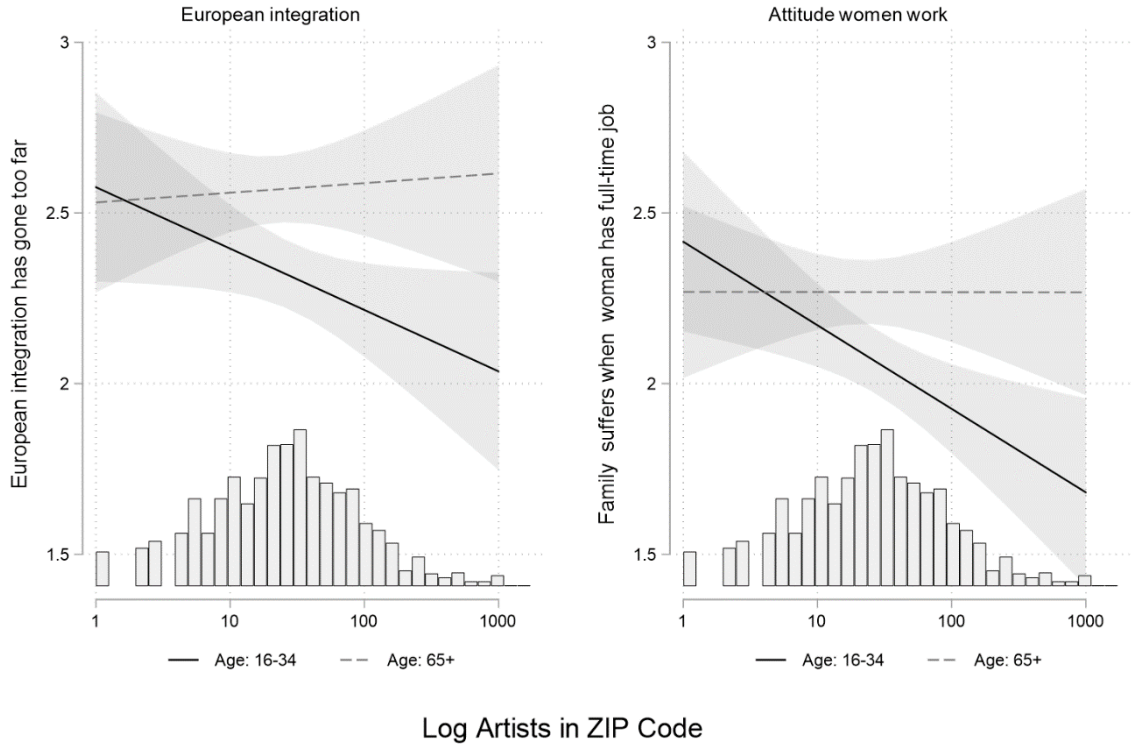


Figure 2: Attitudes toward European integration and gender equality along age and residence

This analysis thus demonstrates that there is a clear age-based urban-rural divide in attitudes along the cultural axis. In addition to these differences in attitudes, we also expected differences in the perception of conflict between urban and rural places. Here, the question is whether people themselves perceive the attitudinal differences that we just analyzed. To gauge this perception of differences to the outgroup, we asked respondents whether they thought that urban and rural people have different values. On average, 58% of respondents strongly or somewhat agreed with this statement. However, there is again a substantial difference by age. Among respondents over 65, only 47% agreed that urban and rural people have different values. Among respondents under 35, by contrast, this share was 69%. Figure 3 shows the predicted probabilities for agreeing with this statement, based on a regression that controls for the familiar set of control variables, including the local number of artists. This regression confirms that younger respondents are significantly more likely to perceive a value difference between urban and rural Germans. Interestingly,

urbanity itself does not seem to affect this perception. There is also no evidence of an interaction between age and urbanity regarding the perception of difference (see appendix). Thus, concerning the perception of conflict, we find indirect evidence for hypothesis 1: the perceived difference between urban and rural people is bigger among younger people. However, we do not find evidence for hypothesis 2: with regard to this perception, the age gradient is the same in urban and rural areas.

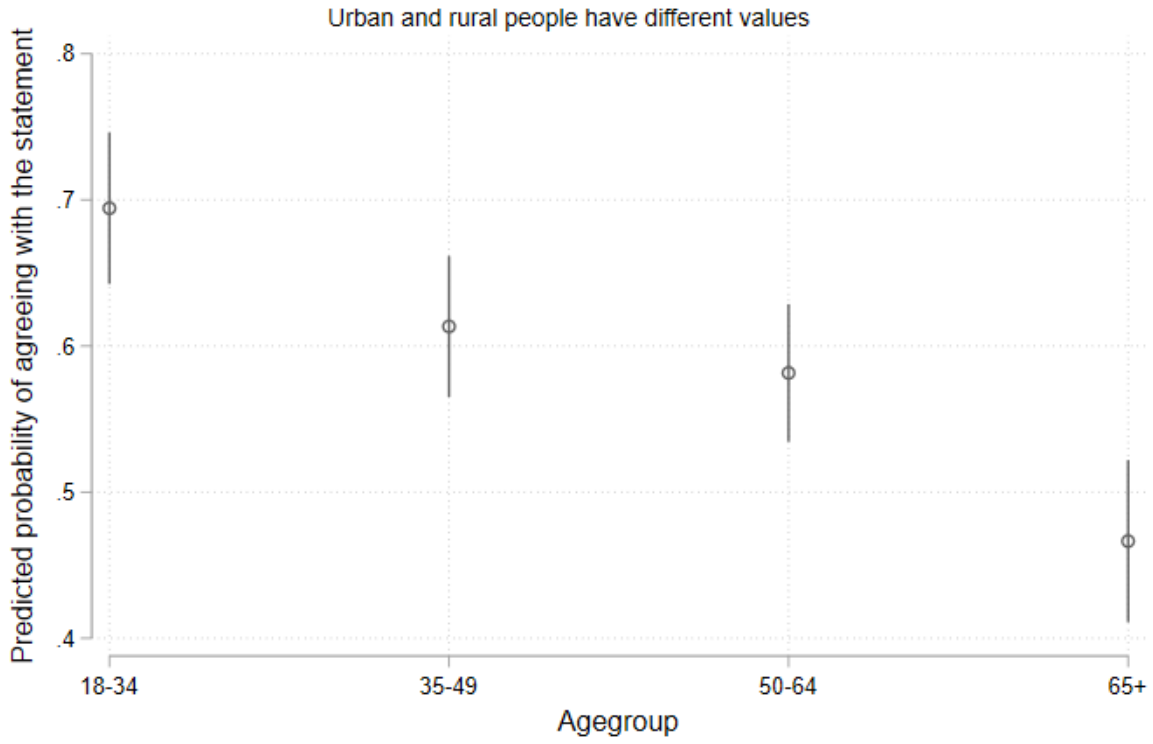


Figure 3: Perception of differences between urban and rural people, four age groups

Party Preference

After demonstrating age-dependent differences in attitudes and perceptions, we now turn to respondents' propensity to vote that we use to measure party preference. Here, we focus on the Greens and the AfD as the parties most strongly associated with an urban-rural divide. Data stems from the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) post-election survey 2021 (3424 respondents). Because the GLES samples respondents on the level of electoral districts, we cluster standard errors at the district level. We measure urbanity by aggregating the number of artists at the district level.[2] As we use the propensity to vote variable, we are also able to include voters aged 16 – 17 in our analysis. Table 1 shows the results for the propensity to vote for the Greens.

Table 1: PtV Greens (Linear Regression Models)

[2] In future iterations of the paper, we will seek to replace this aggregated measure with a ZIP-code-based measure once the geo-coded GLES-dataset becomes available.

	Dependent variable:		
	Propensity to Vote Green		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Age: 16-34 (Reference: 65+)	1.041***	-1.849	-5.273***
	(0.178)	(1.125)	(1.192)
Age: 35-50 (Reference: 65+)	0.058	-3.138*	-4.606***
	(0.184)	(1.263)	(1.265)
Age: 51-64 (Reference: 65+)	0.387*	-3.358**	-4.012***
	(0.179)	(1.120)	(1.181)
Log (10) Artists	1.459***	0.549+	-0.234
	(0.206)	(0.331)	(0.333)
West Germany			1.406***
			(0.159)
Age: 16-34: Log (10) Artists		1.085*	2.026***
		(0.422)	(0.451)
Age: 35-50: Log (10) Artists		1.200*	1.508**
		(0.472)	(0.470)
Age: 51-64: Log (10) Artists		1.412***	1.553***
		(0.419)	(0.445)
Constant	1.800**	4.212***	5.537***
	(0.566)	(0.886)	(0.915)
Control Variables			Yes
Observations	3,129	3,129	2,512
R^2	0.038	0.041	0.145
Adjusted R^2	0.036	0.039	0.137
Residual Std. Error	3.569	3.564	3.362
Note:			+ p<0.1; * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001

Table 2: PtV AfD (Linear Regression Models)

	Dependent variable:		
	Propensity to Vote AfD		
	(4)	(5)	(6)
Age: 16-34 (Reference: 65+)	0.129	1.652*	3.000***
	(0.125)	(0.773)	(0.768)
Age: 35-50 (Reference: 65+)	0.424**	2.092**	3.377***
	(0.131)	(0.781)	(0.877)
Age: 51-64 (Reference: 65+)	0.187	0.872	2.188*
	(0.120)	(0.657)	(0.851)
Log (10) Artists	-0.862***	-0.518*	0.142
	(0.132)	(0.223)	(0.226)
West Germany			-0.756***
			(0.145)
Age: 16-34: Log (10) Artists		-0.568*	-0.946***
		(0.273)	(0.278)
Age: 35-50: Log (10) Artists		-0.624*	-0.995**
		(0.276)	(0.316)
Age: 51-64: Log (10) Artists		-0.259	-0.654*
		(0.247)	(0.322)
Constant	4.325***	3.415***	2.210***
	(0.363)	(0.595)	(0.614)
Control Variables			Yes
Observations	3,117	3,117	2,506
R^2	0.019	0.020	0.073
Adjusted R^2	0.018	0.018	0.064
Residual Std. Error	2.619	2.618	2.493
Note:			+ p<0.1; * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001

Model 1 just shows the direct and familiar association between urbanity and green voting and between age and green voting respectively: More urban and the youngest voters are more likely to support the Greens. There also is a (slightly weaker) effect for voters aged 51-64. This age group captures those voters who came of age in the years of the electoral breakthrough of the Greens, the early 1980s. For the AfD, there is a negative effect of urbanity, while voters in the 35-50 age group are most supportive of the party (Model 4). As shown before, this is in line with other findings displaying an over-proportional level of support for the AfD among middle-aged adults. Young adults, however, are not per se more or less supportive of the AfD than pensioners when we control for urbanity.

Models 2 and 5 introduce the interaction between age and urbanity. Here, we find the expected effect for the Greens: The positive effect of urbanity on support for the Greens is significantly bigger among young voters than among pensioners with young voters in urban areas being more likely to favor the Greens than young voters in rural areas. The results for the AfD show the inverse relationship: here, we find a *negative* effect of urbanity in the two younger age groups compared to pensioners.

Models 3 and 6 in Table 1 and Table 2 demonstrate that these effects also hold if we control for a range of socio-demographic factors. These factors are gender, education, migration background, religion, income, and a dummy for East/West German residence (find the full model in the appendix). Among younger age groups, urbanity strongly and significantly predicts support for the Greens. This effect is strongest for the youngest age group (16-34 years old) but persists for all three constructed age groups with all of them being more likely to vote for the greens in more urban areas than pensioners in similarly urban districts. Among younger voters, urbanity is strongly associated with weaker support for the AfD and thus displays an inverted pattern when compared to the age and urbanity relation when looking at the Greens. The interaction between age and urbanity is strongest for middle-aged adults, supporting the approach of looking at age as a group rather than as a continuous variable[3]. There also is a weak and barely significant effect of urbanity on AfD support among voters aged 51-64 compared to pensioners.

Models 3 and 6 further display that the strong east-west divide holds with the AfD getting strongly more support in East Germany and the Greens being strongly more popular in West Germany. To test whether the urban-age interaction is stronger in specific parts of Germany, we replicated the analysis focusing solely on the East, and the West, respectively. For the Greens, we see that there is no difference between East and West Germany, with younger age cohorts generally being more supportive in urban areas. The effect of urbanity on the PtV for the Greens is slightly stronger for the youngest age group in the West than in the East. However, the effect of the AfD is stronger in the East: Young rural voters in East Germany are more likely to vote for the AfD than young urban East German voters. However, we only find a weak urban-rural difference among West-German age groups and we only find this effect for the youngest voters. The detailed results can be found in the appendix.

[3] We still obtain a significant interaction effect of artist density on the effect of age on PtV for the AfD and the Greens if we include age as a continuous variable. However, a categorical term allows for a more nuanced analysis. The model including a continuous term can be found in the appendix.

Figure 4 and Figure 5 illustrate these effects graphically. They show the predicted values on Green support and AfD support for the oldest (Figure 4) and the youngest (Figure 5) age groups, respectively. The plots also display the distribution of respondents in different urban districts for the respective age groups. Looking at Figure 4 first, we see the effects that had been visible in Table 1 and Table 2, do hold for voters aged 16-34. For the youngest age group, the propensity of voting green strongly increases, the more urbanized a district is. In most urbanized districts, the effect among voters younger than 35 is almost twice as high compared to most rural districts. Looking at Figure 4, we see that the pattern is inverse for the AfD: Young voters in rural districts are indicating a significantly higher propensity to vote for the AfD than those in urban districts. In the most rural districts, there is no difference in the propensity to vote for the Greens or the AfD among the youngest German individuals.

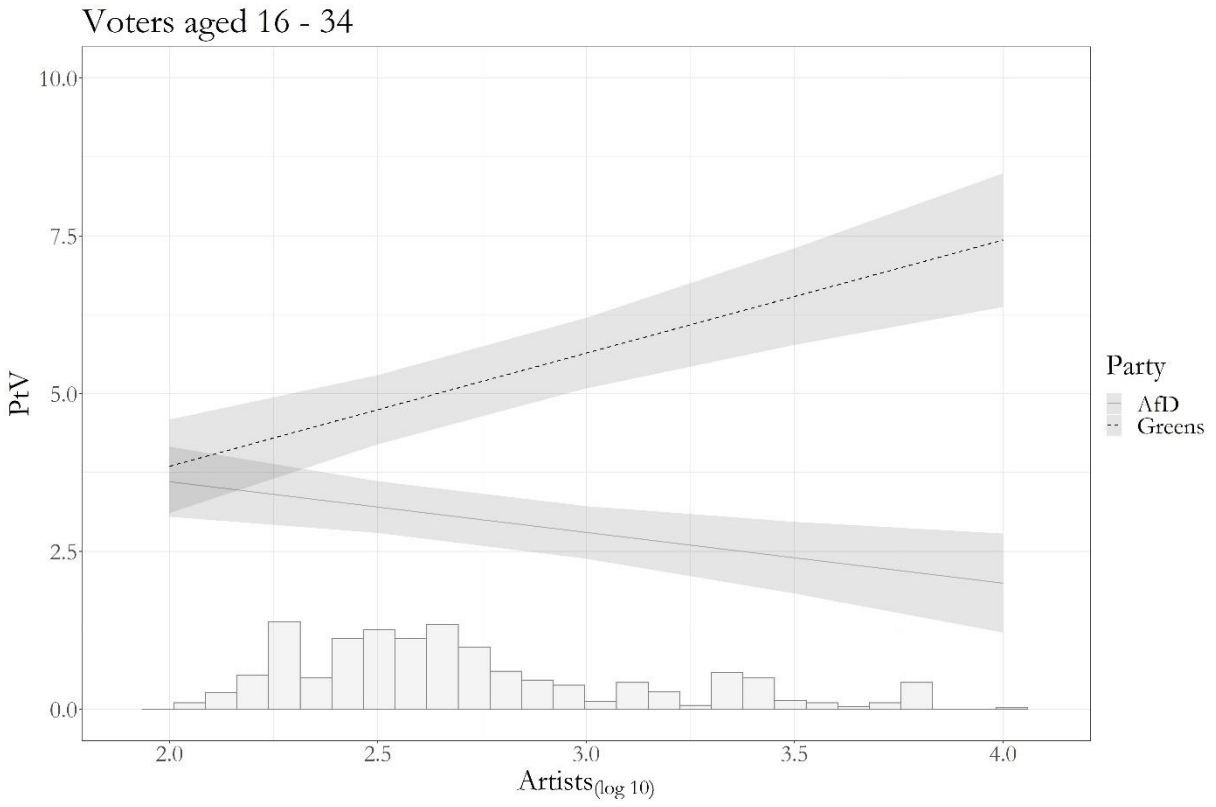


Figure 4: Propensity to vote for the AfD or the Greens among 16–34-year-old voters

However, this strong urban-rural difference is not visible for voters older than 65 for either of the two parties: Pensioners indicate similar levels of vote propensity for the Greens in rural, as well as in urban districts. If anything, Figure 5 shows that older voters in urban districts are even slightly less supportive of the Greens than in rural districts. This is also the case when looking at the AfD support levels: Similar to the Green support pattern, there is no significant difference between old rural and old urban voters in their propensity to vote for the AfD. In general, older voters are more likely to indicate a higher propensity to vote for the Greens than for the AfD, irrespective of the urbanity level of their electoral district.

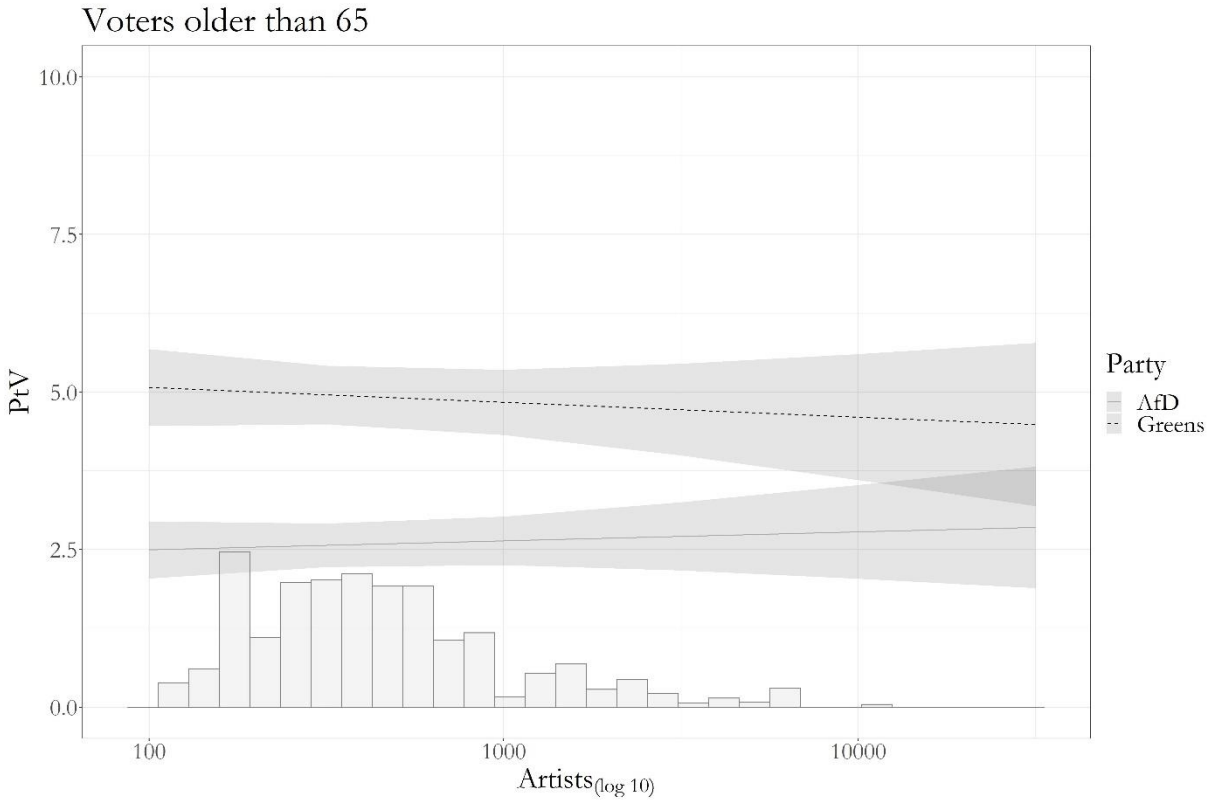


Figure 5: Propensity to vote for the AfD or the Greens among 65+year-old voters

In the appendix, we report equivalent regressions for the other four major parties that are represented in the Bundestag. The regressions display that there is no urban-youth interaction effect for the CDU/CSU and DIE LINKE, but a strong negative interaction effect among FDP voter FDP voters, as well as a very weak but positive urban youth interaction for the SPD. The former points to the fact that the FDP has managed to attract a sizeable share of young voters on the rural side but has failed to do so in more urban areas. This casts doubt on the explanation that the appeal of the FDP among young voters is driven by pandemic-related attitudes, as we would not expect to see this pattern among young people in rural areas but rather in more urban areas. Interestingly, the urban-youth pattern for the FDP is mainly an East German phenomenon (see the appendix), while we do not see such a strong interaction effect in West Germany, especially not for the youngest segment of voters. Hence, in rural regions of East Germany, young voters are over-proportionally in favor of the AfD, as well as the FDP, while young urbanities are strongly in favor of the Green party. This shows that East Germany might be experiencing a "tripolarization" among young voters that follows the urban-rural divide. The patterns for the SPD, however, are neither an East nor a West-German phenomenon. Furthermore, they are considerably weaker than the effects that can be found in the Green electorate. Plotting the effects also reveals the lack of significance.

Taken together, the results demonstrate that younger voters show greater urban-rural differences with regard to their attitudes and their party preference than older voters. We thus find evidence for Hypothesis 1: Young urbanites are more in favor of the Greens than young people in more rural areas and older voters

in urban districts. These patterns thus lead us to support H1a. We also find support for H1b, with young voters in rural areas being more supportive of the AfD than young voters in urban areas and old voters in rural areas. However, as the analysis shows, the urban-rural divide is not just a phenomenon among young voters but also – if not more distinctively – among mid-aged adults. This might point to a cohort effect that could be observed by using longitudinal data. The analysis also shows that the effects are predominantly driven by young "ruralites" in East Germany that show the highest support levels for the party. Having said this, we can still find enough evidence to support H1b.

Finally, we generally see that the difference between young and old voters is considerably bigger in urban than in rural areas when looking at party preference: young voters in urban areas are considerably more distinct from older voters in urban areas regarding their attitudes on the second dimension and particularly their vote preference. This is especially striking when looking at the propensity to vote for the greens: young and old people in urban areas show similar levels of support for the Greens, whereas young urbanites are strongly more in favor of the Greens than old urbanites. However, we do not find differences among young people when we look at their perception of people living in different areas than they do. Overall, we find mixed support for H2: The age gradient is bigger in urban areas when looking at party preference and issue attitudes, but there is no clear distinction when we look at the perception of differences.

Discussion

The 2021 German Federal elections revealed several patterns that have been stronger than ever before: The two parties dominating German politics in the past seven decades, the social democratic SPD and the christian democratic CDU/CSU, were hardly able to attract young voters. In contrast, the Green party got almost a quarter of the vote share among the very youngest voters and came out as the strongest party among voters younger than 35. Furthermore, 2021 showed the strongest urban-rural divide regarding voting behavior in the history of unified Germany with the Greens gaining many votes in urban areas and the AfD being strong in rural regions, especially in East Germany. As we show in this paper, these phenomena are closely linked and should therefore be understood as potentially reinforcing. As we demonstrate, living in an urban area leads to stronger divisions between age groups, indicating a polarizing and reinforcing effect of these two explanatory factors.

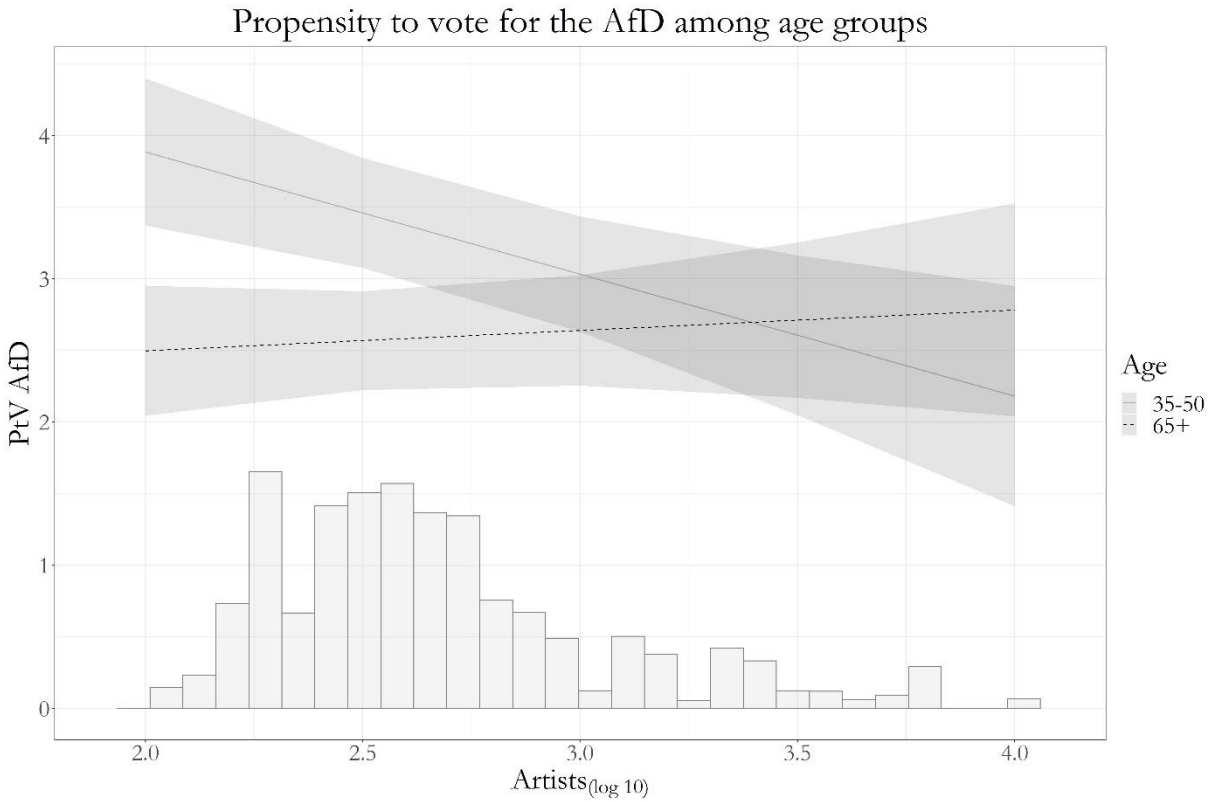
While this paper sheds light on this polarization between the far-right and the progressive-left, it might be of relevance for future studies to analyze the patterns for the liberal FDP as well. Rather surprisingly for many, the 2021 elections also showed over-proportional support for the FDP among young people – and young men in particular – a phenomenon that deserves further attention. Interestingly, this paper showed a strong interaction effect for this party as well, with young voters being much less likely to vote for the liberal party in urban areas than in rural areas. Hence, among young voters, we seem to be observing an urban-rural division with three poles: First, the Greens are forming the progressive-left pole which is particularly strong in urban areas. Second, the AfD is forming an authoritarian-right pole which gains most of its votes

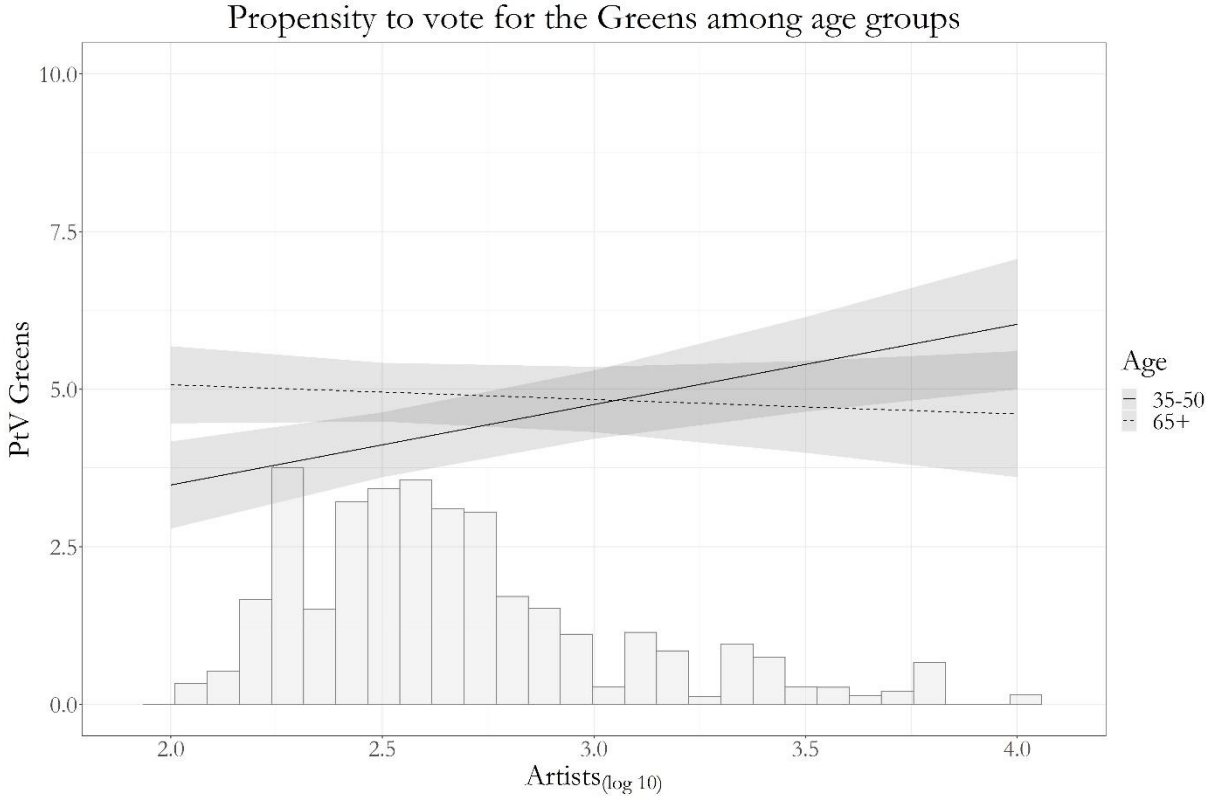
in rural areas. Thirdly, the FDP forms a somewhat progressive-right pole that is mainly gaining support in rural areas. Future studies could potentially observe this polarization in more detail and especially look at differences in the support among young people who either vote for the FDP or the AfD.

Furthermore, it is worth studying in detail how socialization experiences in different urban-rural spaces differ in East and West Germany. Some findings already hint that those mechanisms behind vote choice and attitudinal formation differ in East and West Germany with some of them rooted in divergent socialization experiences (e.g.; (Neundorf 2009, Weisskircher 2020, Elff 2022). Therefore, it is necessary to more closely analyze differences among East Germany's young voters in future studies. This is of particular relevance, as the urban-age divide on the right side of the political spectrum is mainly an East German phenomenon, as our regression models for the AfD and the FDP reveal. It is thus of particular importance to look at potential explanatory factors accounting for voting difference for this distinction.

The 2021 elections should thus not be seen as an outlier but rather as the continuation of a trend: We have seen increasing support for the Greens among young voters since the mid-2000s, as well as a more distinct geographical pattern that has emerged over the past 30 years in Germany. The emergence of the AfD has further led to polarization between rural and urban areas that predominantly affects younger generations: Older generations, especially those who came of age in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, are still sticking to parties that dominated German politics in a time in which the urban-rural divide was not a salient conflict line yet (Haffert 2022). However, in the last 20 years, urban-rural divides have returned to the agenda of German politics. So far, it seems, this has led to a reinforcing polarization that might become even more relevant. Suppose we assume that those age differences are not representing life-cycle differences, but rather cohort effects. In that case, we should see persistent perceptions of the urban-rural divide among people that have come of age in recent decades. Future analyses relying on longitudinal data might try to account for those differences in APC-analyses. Having said this, our results suggest that the urban-rural divide in German politics will only increase in the coming years and will structure German politics to a growing extent.

Appendix


Propensity to vote for the AfD among age groups
PrV AfD
0
1
2
3
4
2.0
2.5
3.0
3.5
4.0
Artists(log 10)
Age
35-50
65+


Propensity to vote for the Greens among age groups
PrV Greens
0.0
2.5
5.0
7.5
10.0
2.0
2.5
3.0
3.5
4.0
Artists(log 10)
Age
35-50
65+

PtV SPD

	Dependent variable:		
	Propensity to Vote SPD		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Age: 16-34 (Reference: 65+)	-0.385**	-1.462+	-2.647*
	(0.135)	(0.858)	(1.037)
Age: 35-50 (Reference: 65+)	-0.412*	-2.007+	-2.776*
	(0.170)	(1.095)	(1.245)
Age: 51-64 (Reference: 65+)	-0.188	-1.982+	-2.800*
	(0.159)	(1.122)	(1.161)
Log (10) Artists	0.240	-0.176	-0.448
	(0.152)	(0.274)	(0.305)
West Germany			0.127
			(0.157)
Age: 16-34: Log (10) Artists		0.407	0.881*
		(0.316)	(0.385)
Age: 35-50: Log (10) Artists		0.598	0.900*
		(0.404)	(0.459)
Age: 51-64: Log (10) Artists		0.677+	0.996*
		(0.409)	(0.426)
Constant	6.571***	7.672***	8.121***
	(0.419)	(0.740)	(0.835)
Control Variables			Yes
Observations	3,130	3,130	2,515
R^2	0.004	0.005	0.025
Adjusted R^2	0.002	0.003	0.017
Residual Std. Error	3.015	3.014	2.953
Note:			+ p<0.1; * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001

PtV CDU/CSU

	Dependent variable:		
	Propensity to Vote CDU/CSU		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Age: 16-34 (Reference: 65+)	-1.220***	-0.850	-1.479
	(0.180)	(1.097)	(1.245)
Age: 35-50 (Reference: 65+)	0.082	1.521	0.808
	(0.199)	(1.434)	(1.551)
Age: 51-64 (Reference: 65+)	-0.419*	-0.131	-0.172
	(0.170)	(1.117)	(1.395)
Log (10) Artists	-0.628***	-0.441	-0.437
	(0.188)	(0.305)	(0.328)
West Germany			-0.085
			(0.172)
Age: 16-34: Log (10) Artists		-0.141	0.130
		(0.392)	(0.429)
Age: 35-50: Log (10) Artists		-0.536	-0.314
		(0.523)	(0.557)
Age: 51-64: Log (10) Artists		-0.108	-0.163
		(0.412)	(0.511)
Constant	8.053***	7.558***	6.791***
	(0.532)	(0.851)	(0.948)
Control Variables			Yes
Observations	3,126	3,126	2,510
R^2	0.024	0.024	0.089
Adjusted R^2	0.022	0.022	0.081
Residual Std. Error	3.474	3.475	3.359
Note:			+ p<0.1; * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001

PtV FDP

	Dependent variable:		
	Propensity to Vote FDP		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Age: 16-34 (Reference: 65+)	0.739***	3.426***	4.293***
	(0.174)	(1.032)	(1.241)
Age: 35-50 (Reference: 65+)	0.421*	3.297**	3.339*
	(0.171)	(1.222)	(1.297)
Age: 51-64 (Reference: 65+)	0.016	0.325	0.996
	(0.145)	(0.954)	(1.202)
Log (10) Artists	-0.623***	-0.115	0.167
	(0.166)	(0.264)	(0.348)
West Germany			-0.029
			(0.195)
Age: 16-34: Log (10) Artists		-1.000**	-1.322**
		(0.379)	(0.443)
Age: 35-50: Log (10) Artists		-1.073*	-1.158*
		(0.455)	(0.477)
Age: 51-64: Log (10) Artists		-0.117	-0.439
		(0.363)	(0.454)
Constant	6.949***	5.605***	4.390***
	(0.465)	(0.706)	(0.958)
Control Variables			Yes
Observations	3,099	3,099	2,495
R^2	0.013	0.016	0.050
Adjusted R^2	0.012	0.014	0.042
Residual Std. Error	3.196	3.192	3.124
Note:			+ p<0.1; * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001

PtV LINKE

	Dependent variable:		
	Propensity to Vote LINKE		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Age: 16-34 (Reference: 65+)	1.076***	-1.472	-0.954
	(0.192)	(1.397)	(1.513)
Age: 35-50 (Reference: 65+)	0.252	-3.474*	-1.734
	(0.198)	(1.432)	(1.372)
Age: 51-64 (Reference: 65+)	-0.023	-2.362+	-1.485
	(0.155)	(1.271)	(1.330)
Log (10) Artists	0.561*	-0.218	0.090
	(0.237)	(0.439)	(0.401)
West Germany			-0.896***
			(0.192)
Age: 16-34: Log (10) Artists		0.956+	0.730
		(0.501)	(0.544)
Age: 35-50: Log (10) Artists		1.394**	0.716
		(0.515)	(0.491)
Age: 51-64: Log (10) Artists		0.882+	0.586
		(0.475)	(0.492)
Constant	2.101**	4.162***	4.625***
	(0.680)	(1.210)	(1.148)
Control Variables			Yes
Observations	3,114	3,114	2,500
R^2	0.022	0.026	0.097
Adjusted R^2	0.021	0.024	0.089
Residual Std. Error	3.221	3.216	3.144
Note:			+ p<0.1; * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001

PtV Greens

	Dependent variable:	
	Propensity to Vote Green	
	West	East
	(1)	(2)
Age: 16-34 (Reference: 65+)	-6.043***	-4.807*
	(1.649)	(1.881)
Age: 35-50 (Reference: 65+)	-4.656**	-4.742*
	(1.789)	(1.992)
Age: 51-64 (Reference: 65+)	-3.106*	-5.629**
	(1.577)	(1.981)
Log (10) Artists	-0.352	-0.150
	(0.433)	(0.525)
Age: 16-34: Log (10) Artists	2.249***	1.960**
	(0.607)	(0.759)
Age: 35-50: Log (10) Artists	1.451*	1.701*
	(0.658)	(0.743)
Age: 51-64: Log (10) Artists	1.211*	2.172**
	(0.576)	(0.791)
Constant	7.430***	5.122***
	(1.229)	(1.321)
Control Variables	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,745	767
R^2	0.115	0.119
Adjusted R^2	0.105	0.094
Residual Std. Error	3.352	3.393
Note:	+ p<0.1; * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001	

PtV AfD

	Dependent variable:	
	Propensity to Vote AfD	
	West	East
	(1)	(2)
Age: 16-34 (Reference: 65+)	2.154**	4.662**
	(0.834)	(1.758)
Age: 35-50 (Reference: 65+)	2.383*	4.624*
	(0.939)	(1.901)
Age: 51-64 (Reference: 65+)	0.687	4.434*
	(0.887)	(1.785)
Log (10) Artists	0.040	0.218
	(0.206)	(0.544)
Age: 16-34: Log (10) Artists	-0.627*	-1.600*
	(0.294)	(0.672)
Age: 35-50: Log (10) Artists	-0.633+	-1.450*
	(0.326)	(0.713)
Age: 51-64: Log (10) Artists	-0.118	-1.472*
	(0.323)	(0.718)
Constant	1.868**	1.683
	(0.582)	(1.417)
Control Variables	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,739	767
R^2	0.051	0.070
Adjusted R^2	0.039	0.044
Residual Std. Error	2.180	3.087
Note:	+ p<0.1; * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001	

PtV FDP

	Dependent variable:	
	Propensity to Vote FDP	
	West	East
	(1)	(2)
Age: 16-34 (Reference: 65+)	2.272	6.657***
	(1.605)	(1.781)
Age: 35-50 (Reference: 65+)	3.615*	2.672
	(1.621)	(1.932)
Age: 51-64 (Reference: 65+)	-1.472	3.366+
	(1.649)	(1.734)
Log (10) Artists	-0.586	1.035*
	(0.386)	(0.500)
Age: 16-34: Log (10) Artists	-0.559	-2.323***
	(0.577)	(0.589)
Age: 35-50: Log (10) Artists	-1.226*	-1.052
	(0.584)	(0.743)
Age: 51-64: Log (10) Artists	0.406	-1.186+
	(0.603)	(0.668)
Constant	6.409***	2.324
	(1.118)	(1.443)
Control Variables	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,738	757
R^2	0.066	0.047
Adjusted R^2	0.054	0.020
Residual Std. Error	3.083	3.200
Note:	+ p<0.1; * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001	

PtV

	Dependent variable:	
	Propensity to Vote Greens	Propensity to Vote AfD
	(1)	(2)
Age	0.117***	-0.064***
	(0.025)	(0.015)
Log (10) Artists	3.123***	-1.459***
	(0.490)	(0.309)
West Germany	1.449***	-0.759***
	(0.158)	(0.147)
Age: Log (10) Artists	-0.041***	0.019***
	(0.009)	(0.005)
Constant	-3.832**	7.544***
	(1.327)	(0.889)
Control Variables	Yes	Yes
Observations	2,512	2,506
R^2	0.139	0.068
Adjusted R^2	0.133	0.061
Residual Std. Error	3.371	2.497
Note:		+ p<0.1; * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001

PtV

	Dependent variable:	
	Propensity to Vote Greens	Propensity to Vote AfD
	(1)	(2)
Age: 16-34 (Reference: 65+)	-5.273***	3.000***
	(1.192)	(0.768)
Age: 35-50 (Reference: 65+)	-4.606***	3.377***
	(1.265)	(0.877)
Age: 51-64 (Reference: 65+)	-4.012***	2.188*
	(1.181)	(0.851)
Log(10) Artists	-0.234	0.142
	(0.333)	(0.226)
Sex	-0.882***	0.478***
	(0.137)	(0.114)
Catholic (Reference: No Religion)	-0.175	-0.082
	(0.182)	(0.138)
Protestant (Reference: No Religion)	-0.774	-0.261
	(0.550)	(0.419)
Other Religion (Reference: No Religion)	0.153	-0.234+
	(0.139)	(0.126)
Migration Background	-0.160	0.016
	(0.161)	(0.116)
Income: 2000-3000€ (Reference: Less than 2000€)	0.081	-0.104
	(0.195)	(0.164)
Income: 3000-5000€ (Reference: Less than 2000€)	0.222	-0.269+
	(0.199)	(0.153)
Income: more than 5000€ (Reference: Less than 2000€)	0.429+	-0.421*
	(0.235)	(0.165)
Abitur (Reference: Mittlere Reife)	1.551***	-0.635***
	(0.170)	(0.142)
Fachhochschule (Reference: Mittlere Reife)	0.729**	-0.315
	(0.235)	(0.192)
Hauptschule (Reference: Mittlere Reife)	-0.466+	0.204
	(0.240)	(0.204)
School not finished (Reference: Mittlere Reife)	-0.166	0.636
	(0.760)	(0.724)
Other Education (Reference: Mittlere Reife)	0.925	-0.825+
	(0.603)	(0.440)

Scholar (Reference: Mittlere Reife)	2.594***	0.303
	(0.627)	(0.629)
West Germany	1.406***	-0.756***
	(0.159)	(0.145)
Age: 16-34:Log(10) Artists	2.026***	-0.946***
	(0.451)	(0.278)
Age: 35-50:Log(10) Artists	1.508**	-0.995**
	(0.470)	(0.316)
Age: 51-64:Log(10) Artists	1.553***	-0.654*
	(0.445)	(0.322)
Constant	5.537***	2.210***
	(0.915)	(0.614)
Observations	2,512	2,506
R^2	0.145	0.073
Adjusted R^2	0.137	0.064
Residual Std. Error	3.362	2.493
Note:	+ p<0.1; * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001	

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